

Michael Quisinsky, Fáinche Ryan, Jens Van Rompaey
(Eds.)

Being Young – Being Catholic – Being European



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Being Young – Being Catholic – Being European

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European Perspectives

Theologie Ost – West

Europäische Perspektiven

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Being Young – Being Catholic – Being European

Edited by

Michael Quisinsky

Fáinche Ryan

Jens Van Rompaey

LIT

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INTRODUCTION

ON NEW BEGINNINGS, TRADITION AND HOPE

Fáinche Ryan & Michael Quisinsky

Initium ergo ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quam nullus fuit – “That there be a beginning, human being was created before whom there was nobody”.¹ These words of St Augustine are cited by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*. She continues:

“It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started/ which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins. ... The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that the human is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that one is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible because each human is unique, so that with each new birth something uniquely new comes into the world.”²

This important concept of new beginnings, of the possibility of new actions, Arendt terms *natality*, the second birth which is a possibility for all. Natality is understood as an exposure to newness, a second birth to which all humans are potentially privy. Natality is tightly bound with freedom, understood not as the ability to choose among a set of possible alternatives, but as spontaneity, the capacity to begin, to start something new, to do the unexpected. Action, the realization of freedom, is rooted in this concept of *natality*. Biologically with each new birth comes the introduction of novelty to the world. Natality, the human gift of initiating new beginnings through speech, must be formed and enabled to flourish through education, and as Arendt styles it, education must prepare people to live in a plural world, a world of diversity, a world in which decisions must be made, a world in which people must stand up for opinions, and perhaps begin to enact

¹ Hannah Arendt quoting Augustine’s *Civitas Dei*, lib. 12, cap. 20. Cited in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1958. 2nd Edition with an Introduction by Margaret Canovan, 1998), 177.

² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1958. 2nd Edition with an Introduction by Margaret Canovan, 1998.) 177–178.

traditions differently. Education must equip people “to intervene, to alter, to create what is new.”³ Arendt’s concept of natality is active, illuminating a path forward.

With the foundation of the European Society of Catholic Theology in 1989 something “new” came into the world of theology, specifically in Europe. This newness was born in a Europe undergoing great change, with accompanying challenges and hope - the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, the most visible symbol of division at the heart of Europe, a physical representation of the Iron Curtain, represented the end of the Cold War, the end of Communist domination in Europe. The society continues this aim of fostering newness as we nurture young scholars, junior scholars whatever their age, into the rich theological and cultural traditions of Europe.

It is from this desire to nurture newness, and in response to the enthusiasm of our junior members, that conversation between Jens Van Rompaey (Belgium), Fáinche Ryan (Ireland), and Michael Quisinsky (Germany) led to the concept of this book – “let us ask our scholars to tell us what is it like to be young, to be Catholic, to be European in a world much changed from 1989”.

Each era has its own challenges. Globally today people are faced with climate crises, geopolitical turmoil, economic instabilities – and it is the “young” who are particularly challenged to find ways to respond and navigate all these crises. In 1989 “to be Catholic” in Europe, in some countries, was something to be proud of. At this same time in other European countries Catholics, especially the young, could be very critical because in their view, the Church did not sufficiently continue the *aggiornamento* of Vatican II. In one way or another, being Catholic gave a strong identity and provided clear guidelines to help a person navigate how to live well in the world. Today virtually everywhere in Europe Catholic Christians are a minority, beset by scandals, with leadership which seems to have lost courage, providing no adequate response to questions such as the role of women, and struggling to address constructively the flood of gender issues facing society.

In short, it is a challenge to be Catholic, particularly to be “young” and Catholic ... in a Church wherein even the understanding of what it means to be Catholic is contested. And then there is the question of being European. Challenges here are both *ad intra* and *ad extra*. *Ad extra* the President of the United States speaks of the danger of civilizational erasure when it comes to Europe.⁴ *Ad intra* the

³ Hannah Arendt, “The crisis in education” in H. Arendt (Ed.), *Between past and future: Eight exercises in political thought*. New York: Penguin, 2006, 170–193, here at 189.

⁴ “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” November 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

balancing of local, national identities with that of a shared European one is an ongoing challenge. Questions even arise as to the value of democracy.

Being a young theologian carries its unique challenges not least where to get paid employment when theology faculties are being closed, and paid ecclesial opportunities are becoming more curtailed in some countries and have never really been developed in others. The challenge of being so “different” amongst peers, the challenge of doing theology in “creative fidelity” to our rich inheritance while addressing a myriad of new questions, and of avoiding the risk of sliding too far to the “right”, with the danger of too clear a view of the Truth, or of gliding too far “left” and creating a subjective own theology, a personal belief system. Either perspective runs the risk of “trapping” God within human modes of thinking.

At once it is wonderful to be young, Catholic and European. Europe and its values, the EU and its founding vision, are deeply rooted in the Catholic Christian narrative. The art, literature, and music of Europe share the inheritance of an almost 2,000-year tradition of Christianity on our continent. The Gospel has shaped European culture, and mores. Theological literacy enables people to understand our culture, our history. Theologians have an important role here, in promoting theological literacy not only for evangelistic motives but also to promote an understanding of Europe amongst the many who live in Europe who are not Christian, not literate on Catholic matters. The Church is always experiencing natality, moments of rebirth. Hope gets born anew in each generation. Technological advances allow for rich European communications and co-operations, enabling Europe to express its membership of a global Church community more clearly. We can learn more from one another.

Synodality, which might be said to be our era’s “natality”, newness, while at the same time deeply rooted in Tradition, assists the process of grace working with nature, building on nature. In a world in need of hope, the Gospel proclaimed and enacted shares this hope. In a world where people pay hundreds of thousands so that they, or their pets, can be preserved cryogenically (a process known as vitrification), to experience a second birth with the objective of future revival, the Gospel operative of an eschatological dynamic allows for the thousands to be used to create sparks of the Kingdom in this life, “in sure and certain hope” of eternal life.

The European Society of Catholic Theology believes it has a role to play, in co-operation, dialogue, critical engagement with global societies of theology, the Church, and academy, in fostering hope. We are all too aware of the dangers of the eclipse of the European theological tradition, amidst the wonderful growth of the Global Church and the many theological conversations taking place. We foster young new scholarship, to ensure we continue to have a voice in Church matters, in theology matters. What is at stake in our world is our very concept of what

it means to be human ... human created after God's image and likeness. Our 2,000-year tradition, and our ever-new engagement with this tradition and with the "world" of each time, we believe has matters of importance to offer to our global world, our synodal Church. We want to promote our members, and in particular our younger members to be informed of our rich inheritance, to think in a dialogical way, to engage critically, and to be active contributors toward the formation of a more synodal Church. Theology we believe gives hope to our world; for us, the older members of the Society our younger scholars give hope to us.

The vision and project which gave birth to this publication has from the beginning been a work of younger and older, of dialogue and of critique, of diverse cultures gathered to seek ways to better communicate God to a Europe, to a world in crisis. Those whose work you read here have been on an intense journey started at the ESCT congress *Ad theologiam promovendam* in Dublin in 2025.⁵ We began with a call for papers, then following a process of selection we proceeded to host a number of Zoom seminars at which the scholars presented their work, and engaged in critical discussion with other scholars, young and old. These seminar sessions were inspirational. Following these seminars written papers were submitted, and peer reviewed, with kindness, by senior members of our Society, and revised by the young scholars, following the feedback received. The papers express a diversity of views and ideas. To aid the reader these have been grouped thematically.

The editors are very grateful for the funding received from the Peter Hünemann Foundation which has enabled us to publish this work, and for the University of Education Karlsruhe which has ensured we can make this work available via Open Access. We would also like to thank the publishers, LIT Verlag, who have supported our publications over many years. Last but not least thanks to our Society, which has enabled each one of us to encounter difference, to learn the richness which comes from dialogue, alongside the challenges of diversity. Its synodal theological enterprise, begun in the 1980s has born many fruits. It is our responsibility to foster this enterprise amongst those newer to the theological journey. Last, but not least, we thank our young scholars, those whose contributions are in this book, and the many other young scholars in our member countries: "The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability (...) the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle."

⁵ The proceedings of this congress will be published by Fainche Ryan and Emmett O'Regan (eds.), forthcoming.

TRADITION-BOUND OR TRADITION-SHATTERING? AN EFFORT AT REIMAGINING CATHOLIC THEOLOGY IN EUROPE THROUGH YOUNG VOICES

Jens Van Rompaey

Abstract

This introductory chapter frames the volume's central ambition: to rethink Catholic theology in Europe by foregrounding the questions, perspectives, and methodological intuitions of young and emerging scholars. Rather than offering definitive answers, the chapter specifically argues for the importance of raising questions itself. Drawing on the insights of Charles Taylor and Thomas Kuhn, as well as the ongoing global synodal process (2021–2028), it highlights the need for the Catholic Church to adopt a more open dialogue, one that avoids pre-packaged solutions and instead addresses the lived experiences and potentially disruptive questions that arise in contemporary contexts.

The chapter will first examine the three key terms structuring the volume, namely Europe, Catholic, and being young, and show the complexity and contestation inherent in each. This brief exploration illustrates what is at stake in the contributions that follow. Secondly, the philosophical insights of Thomas Kuhn will be used to help clarify how paradigms operate and why the perspectives of junior scholars are essential for reimagining contemporary Catholic theology. Kuhn's framework offers both a productive analytical lens and a precise vocabulary for uncovering several of the questions that the subsequent chapters seek to address.

This volume emerged from the collaborative initiative of Fáinche Ryan, Michael Quisinsky, and Jens Van Rompaey. At its inception, we envisioned a project under the title *Being Young – Being Catholic – Being European*. Taken individually, these elements might appear familiar, even unremarkable. After all, the role of religion in Europe has long been debated. And, while some claim a renewed interest among young people in Catholicism,¹ questions surrounding Catholic identity generate significant debate and even conflict. Viewed in this light, our title could seem to be merely riding the wave of current debates that enjoy strong public appeal. Yet, when considered together, these three dimensions open a space for deeper reflection and critical inquiry, inviting us to explore what is truly

¹ Vriesema, “Nog geen trend, wel opvallend.” In English, the title of the article is: “Not yet a trend, but noteworthy: religion is gaining ground among young Europeans”. The author of this article suggests that, for the first time since World War II, there are signs that younger generations are more religious than the generation before them.

at stake at their intersection. Considered together, they acquire a special significance.

The main objective of this project is to encourage discussion and bring junior scholars together around a specific theme. On the one hand, the intersection of the three topics under consideration, as I will argue in this chapter, is still highly relevant and has not been exhausted as a topic of reflection and scholarship. On the other hand, these emerging scholars have something to say on exactly these topics, it concerns them both academically and personally. As I will discuss with reference to the insights of Thomas Kuhn, their contributions are essential because junior scholars have not yet become deeply invested in established paradigms. Consequently, and central to this project, working with junior scholars enables us to foreground questions rather than the production of definitive or final answers.

Each component of the overarching title lends itself to problematization, critique, nuance, and further discussion. In this chapter, I will first outline the necessity of raising questions rather than providing answers, then I will indicate why the three central elements of our title are significant, and finally, I invite the reader to consider the profound and maybe even disrupting implications of these questions for how theology is practiced and studied today.

Raising questions...

The state of the Catholic Church, its engagement with young people, and its European or even Eurocentric identity are all subjects of intense debate. Even in this single sentence, I have already qualified the key concepts of the overarching title of this project in a way that is not necessarily agreed upon by the authors of the subsequent chapters. One might even ask, from a more sceptical perspective, whether raising additional questions, and thereby further complicating matters, is even necessary. I believe it is necessary, and I am not alone in this. The *Final Document* of the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (2018) reads: “All too often, there is a tendency to provide pre-packaged answers and ready-made solutions, without allowing young people’s real questions to emerge and to face the challenges they pose.”² Even in this institutional, ecclesial setting, namely a synod of bishops, the participating bishops were aware that the answers they provided did not necessarily address the real questions and challenges faced by young people. This is, however, not a problem that only affects young people in the Catholic Church. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, to name one notable and vocal example, eloquently wrote, already in 2012, that in the Catholic Church, there are “[t]oo many answers choking off questions, and too little sense of the enigmas that accompany a life of faith; these are what stop a conversation

² Synodus Episcoporum, *Final Document - XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on ‘Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment’*, n° 8.

from ever starting between our church and much of our world.”³ Fundamentally, as Taylor argues in this chapter, the openness to questions is both necessary for and integrally connected with a life of faith.

As this book appears during the implementation phase of the synod of bishops on synodality (2024-2028), it remains an urgent question as to which questions can be raised in ecclesial settings. Who can raise questions, and how are they dealt with? In this context, it was promising that the International Theological Commission (ITC) in 2018 in their document on synodality already noted that “dialogue offers the opportunity to acquire new perspectives and points of view in order to shed light on the solution of the matter in question”.⁴ Nevertheless, engaging in dialogue with the entire People of God is a complex undertaking. This is not only so for practical reasons, namely how does one consult 1.5 billion Catholics, but also more theologically, how does one find the *sensus fidei*. What is, e.g., the role of the magisterium in ‘defining’ or ‘finding’ that *sensus*? The complexity of dialogue (and its institutional form) is also clear in the ITC document. For instance, the ITC appreciates the consultation of the People of God. While such a consultation is necessary, and while it is an ancient practice, the ITC also feels the need to clarify that dialogue or consultation do not equate to conciliarism or parliamentarianism. Both are to be avoided.⁵

For this edited volume, we selected three central themes (Europe, being young and being Catholic) and explored them further. In the following section, I will highlight the complexity and importance of each one. The subsequent section then explains why and how the views of young or junior theologians on Europe matter, drawing on insights from Kuhn.

... on which topics

Europe

As this book project emerged from a collaboration within the European Society for Catholic Theology, a focus on Europe is not only not surprising, but also intrinsically and profoundly connected to the Society’s work, given the paramount importance of the question of Europe’s peaceful future in politics and the role of religion. At the same time, in the Church, this region is often neglected as too progressive, or regarded as a lost cause due to secularisation. However, Europe is a hard to define continent (even geographically) and it has a complicated relationship with, e.g., its Christian history, or roots, as some would argue (culturally).⁶ In the words of the German theologian Annemarie Mayer:

³ Taylor, “The Church Speaks - to Whom?,” 20.

⁴ International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church”, n° 111.

⁵ Ibid., n° 65.

⁶ I am very much indebted to the following book: Vanheeswijck, *De draad van Penelope*.

“Europe has undergone a long journey to develop from the Phoenician princess of Greek mythology seduced by Zeus in the disguise of a white bull or the name for the territory between Gibraltar and the Black Sea in Herodotus’s Histories to what it is today: a continent in the northern hemisphere associated with the homelands of Christianity and connected with a culture with values like democracy, human rights and solidarity.”⁷

This quotation from Mayer highlights how any discussion of Europe almost inevitably invokes Christianity, as well as its relationship with Greek mythology and, ultimately, Greek philosophy. The French literary scholar and theologian Michel Fédou emphasizes that Christianity was inculturated in Europe and it was a successful inculturation for many centuries, but it seems that the inculturation does not hold anymore. Moreover, as Fédou observes, authors too easily employ three geographical centres, Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome, as a *pars pro toto* for European culture. These centres respectively represent Jewish heritage, Greek philosophical thought, and Latin Christianity. Fédou does not agree that they simply go together. While Rome and Athens lie in what is today considered Europe, the same does not hold for Jerusalem. Even more, as Mayer already indicated, Europe was a Phoenician princess and so she was not ‘strictly’ European in geographical terms.

In ecclesial circles, at least for several decades, there has been an awareness of these complexities. Pope John Paul II already said in his *Closing Address* of the 1991 synod of bishops on Europe that: “This plurality on the European continent is particularly rich. The Greek and Latin tradition inherited from antiquity was already consolidated during the first millennium among European nations and peoples.”⁸ While the pope speaks of a consolidation in a culture, he, at the same time, also spoke of a plurality. And, to complicate matters even more, in his 1999 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, he wrote a paragraph on “Asia, the Birthplace of Jesus and of the Church”.⁹ This further complicates matters. When we turn our attention to the African continent, it becomes evident that it too has a long and ancient engagement with Christianity. The history of evangelization “goes back to the period of the Church’s very birth”, as the 1995 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* calls it.¹⁰ In contrast to Pope Francis, Pope John Paul II did not mention the complexity of colonialism in the

⁷ Mayer, “Christianity in Western and Northern Europe,” 15.

⁸ Pope John Paul II in: Segreteria generale del Sinodo dei vescovi, *Enchiridion del Sinodo dei vescovi (1989-1995)*, 3519.

Original: “Questa pluralità nel continente europeo è particolarmente ricca. La tradizione greca e latina ereditata dall’antichità si è consolidata già nel corso del primo millennio tra le nazioni e popoli europei.” (Translation by the author)

⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, n°5.

¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, n° 30.

evangelization of Africa explicitly.¹¹ The importance of the principle of continentality in the Church is further evidenced by the fact that John Paul II eventually convoked synods on all continents.¹²

These brief observations serve several purposes. They decentre the European narrative over or against other continental narratives while emphasising the fact that “Christianity has been the majority religion in most of Europe for the last 17 centuries, which is longer than on any other continent”.¹³ Although the recent developments of secularisation and demographic shifts are obvious, they nevertheless raise many questions for theologians as they signal profound changes in the Catholic Church. At the same time, they bring into focus the complexity of the place from which one reflects theologically. Without delving into the question too deep for the purpose of this chapter, the Manifesto *For a Theology from the Mediterranean* remarks that Europe (and Rome particularly) is closely related to the Mediterranean and that this is theologically relevant. This sea eventually figures centrally as a place of “three continents (Africa, Asia, Europe) and the five shores (North Africa, Middle East, Black and Aegean Seas, Balkans and Latin Europe)”, it is not only a place of encounter and dialogue, but also the site of conflict and trauma.¹⁴

Catholic

Not only does the ‘place’ of reflection matter; so too does the object of reflection. What does it mean to be Catholic today? The question arises of how a Catholic identity can be understood in a context where the traditional markers by which being European was easily equated with being Christian have changed. Additionally, what are the implications of the demographic shifts in the number of Catholics? Considering the previous comments on geography, what cultural or geographical sources does one draw from? For reasons of brevity, I limit myself to the challenging understanding of being Catholic as developed by Taylor. For him, catholicity has to do with “the original word *katholou*” that he understands in “two related senses, comprising both universality and wholeness; one might say universality through wholeness”.¹⁵ This means that it is imperative that Catholics do not strive for uniformity because that would be a “unity bought at the price of

¹¹ See for example how John Paul II does not explicitly mention colonialism in the historical overview of Christianity in Africa, and how Francis even explicitly reflects on colonialism and its continued and contemporary impact: Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, n°s 30-37; Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, n°s 9-19.

¹² See also: Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America* (1995), and also *Ecclesia in Oceania* (2001).

Eventually, authored by Pope Benedict XVI, there are also *Africae Munus* (2011), and *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* (2012).

¹³ Mayer, “Christianity in Western and Northern Europe,” 15.

¹⁴ Institut Catholique de la Méditerranée ed., *For a Theology from the Mediterranean*, 4 and 7.

¹⁵ Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?,” 14.

suppressing something of the diversity in the humanity that God created”.¹⁶ This explains more theologically why Taylor steers away from what he calls “answers choking off questions”, it leads to a forced unity at the expense of a divinely created diversity.

At a theological level, much is at stake with these notions of unity and catholicity, a fact the Catholic Church explicitly acknowledges in, e.g., the *Final Document* of the 2021-2024 synod of bishops. This document uses the concept “unity in diversity” extensively.

“The whole Church has always been comprised of a plurality of peoples and languages as well as of local Churches. In turn, these local Churches have always possessed their own rites and disciplines as well as their own distinctive theological and spiritual heritage; so too, their own vocations, charisms and ministries at the service of the common good. *Unity in diversity* is realised by Christ, the cornerstone, and the Holy Spirit, the source of all harmony. This *unity in diversity* is precisely what is meant by the catholicity of the Church. The plurality of the Churches *sui iuris*, of which the synodal process highlighted the richness, is a sign of this very catholicity.”¹⁷

Without addressing the full range of questions that this citation might raise, I want to highlight the fundamental theological issues that come to the fore. These include questions on the meaning of unity, the scope of permissible or legitimate diversity within the Church, the proper understanding of catholicity, and the ‘agent’ responsible for realizing it. Unity in diversity can only be lived in the Spirit through Christ, without coercion, lest it collapse into uniformity. Ultimately, this concerns the very catholicity of the Church, once again demonstrating how a seemingly simple question about what it means to be Catholic today can spiral out of control and encompass a broad variety of topics.

Young

Regarding the third central element of our project, this book was conceived as a platform for scholarly exchange for junior researchers. Junior scholars have something to say. They are and should be part of the conversation, rather than being talked about. Additionally, junior scholars often encounter structural challenges that hinder their ability to contribute valuable ideas to scientific debates. One such challenge is conducting thorough, detailed research during their doctorates while remaining aware of overarching, international issues without becoming biased in one direction or another.

¹⁶ Ibid., 14.

¹⁷ Synodus Episcoporum, 2024 *Final Document*, n° 38. (Italics added)

In this reading, the concept “young” or “junior” carries a pragmatic connotation. However, it also bears a deeper significance. Linguistically, for example, “young” and “old” are oppositional categories. In a way that is both more theologically relevant yet still within this oppositional understanding, Pope Francis articulated a profound connection between the two during the 2023 World Youth Days in Lisbon, relating them to Europe in the process.

“It is my hope that World Youth Day may be, for the “Old Continent” – we can say the “Elder Continent” – an impulse towards universal openness, an impulse that makes it younger. For the world needs Europe, the true Europe. It needs Europe’s role as a bridge and peacemaker in its eastern part, in the Mediterranean, in Africa and in the Middle East.”¹⁸

This statement, which uses oppositional terms and portrays Europe positively as the “elder continent,” contrasts sharply with his 2014 speech to the European Parliament where he called Europe “a ‘grandmother’, no longer fertile and vibrant”.¹⁹ Although this statement borders on ageism and gendered normative interpretations of womanhood and motherhood, Pope Francis is also the pontiff who explicitly addressed the role of young people in the Church through the 2018 Synod. He has, at the very least, a complex record in this regard.

In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit*, the pope wrote that “we cannot just say that young people are the future of our world. They are its present; even now, they are helping to enrich it”.²⁰ This sentence is rhetorically compelling not only in form but also in content, as it reflects his recognition of the need to engage with young people already today, acknowledging that they are not merely future stakeholders but that they can and should already be active participants. Of particular interest is the fact that throughout the exhortation, the pope heavily draws on the experiences and exchanges that took place during the celebration of the synod, quoting extensively from the *Final Document*. So, while Pope Francis at times employed gendered or age-based stereotypes, he also demonstrated a willingness to draw on the lived experiences of young people in the Church and integrate them into ecclesial (and magisterial) discourse. This observation, though not without criticism of certain aspects of his use of language, leads to a crucial question: why does this matter? Why should we listen to these young voices that are already there, and why should we reflect on what it means to be young?

¹⁸ Pope Francis, “Apostolic Journey to Portugal: Meeting with the Authorities, Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corps in the Cultural Centre of Belém.”

¹⁹ Pope Francis, “Visit of His Holiness Pope Francis to the European Parliament and to the Council of Europe.”

²⁰ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, n° 64.

And why and how it matters

As already briefly mentioned, the ITC itself indicated that dialogue creates opportunities for acquiring new perspectives in search of solutions. The particularity of this book is exactly that it brings together junior/young/emerging scholars on a variety of topics to address complicated questions. And while, as indicated in the introduction of this chapter, too many questions are choked off, Pope Francis seemed to have deliberately steered away from what one could call a *status quo* theology. In his *motu proprio* *Ad theologiam promovendam* (ATP), he states that “we cannot limit ourselves to abstractly re-proposing formulas and schemes from the past”.²¹ Likewise, he called for an outgoing theology both in ATP and in his *Letter to the Grand Chancellor of the Catholic University of Argentina* in 2015:

“Teaching and studying theology means living on a frontier, one in which the Gospel meets the needs of the people to whom it should be proclaimed in an understandable and meaningful way. We must guard against a theology that is exhausted in academic dispute or one that looks at humanity from a glass castle.”²²

In ATP number 6, he refers to one of his addresses to the members of the ITC, connecting theology and synodality closely. However, his approach operates not merely at the level of content – namely, how theologians conceptualize synodality – but rather at the level of theological form. He invites “theologians to do theology in a synodal way, developing their capacity to listen to each other, to dialogue, to discern and to harmonise their many and varied approaches and contributions”.²³ Ironically, the pope is here quoting from the ITC’s own 2018 document.²⁴ ATP is in many ways a remarkable document about a theology concerned with real life and lived experience, not enclosed in itself, and shaped synodally. However, for the purpose of this chapter, I want to focus more particularly on the idea of a paradigm shift in theological reflection, as hinted at in ATP number 4. This emphasis is justified, as the text contains an unmistakable allusion to Thomas S. Kuhn’s philosophical work.²⁵ Moreover, Kuhn explores the nature of traditional scientific practice, the role of innovative insights, and the dynamics of

²¹ Pope Francis, *Motu Proprio, Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, n° 1.

²² Pope Francis, “Letter of the Holy Father to the Grand Chancellor of the ‘Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina’ for the 100th Anniversary of the Founding of the Faculty of Theology”; Pope Francis, *Motu Proprio, Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, n° 3.

²³ Pope Francis, “Address to Members of the International Theological Commission”; Pope Francis, *Motu Proprio, Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, n° 6.

²⁴ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n° 75.

²⁵ Explicitly referenced in: Piana, “Staglianò: ‘Theology Must Be Conceived More and More as Wisdom.’” In this interview, however, Staglianò presents the paradigm shifts in theology as non-revolutionary, which seems to be a *contradictio in terminis*.

scientific revolutions, processes in which, according to him, junior scholars can play a pivotal role.

Paradigm shifts

Before turning to Kuhn's seminal work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, one must note the remarkable prominence it occupies within scholarly discourse. Philip Kitcher points out that works in the philosophy of science rarely achieve mass readership, yet Kuhn's work stands as a singular exception. Its influence extends across disciplines and beyond academia, introducing concepts, most notably "paradigm", into common discourse. The book has shaped intellectual trends and public debate, even inspiring movements that Kuhn himself regarded with scepticism. Nevertheless, its impact on contemporary thought is profound and lasting. Kitcher therefore also warns against a superficial reading of Kuhn that does not do justice to the complexity of his thought.²⁶

In ATP, the notion of a paradigm shift is only briefly mentioned, without substantive engagement.²⁷ In this chapter, however, I engage more deeply with Kuhn's insights and terminology to underscore the indispensability of dialogue with young and junior scholars, ultimately reconnecting these reflections to the broader question of how, and why, we should avoid choking off questions.

The work of Kuhn primarily deals with the hard sciences that operate based on established paradigms. These paradigms are, in one of his shortest definitions, based on "universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners".²⁸ Essential in the emergence of a paradigm, according to Kuhn, is that it succeeds better in explaining facts than other theories with which it competes. Explaining facts more effectively does not mean accounting for all the facts researchers encounter, which is why model problems arise. Regularly, researchers engage in what he calls "mopping up", i.e., trying to make nature fit into the framework provided by a paradigm. This is not a problem for Kuhn because most scientists specialise in a relatively small field. Furthermore, they can isolate themselves from other significant social issues because these do not align with the conceptual framework or tools of their field of science. The isolation of a specific research domain is foundational to scientific progress, as it permits sustained focus and methodological rigor that would be impossible across vast areas of investigation.²⁹

²⁶ Kitcher, "After Kuhn," 633.

For an interesting theological reception of Kuhn, see Küng and Tracy, *Paradigm Change in Theology*.

²⁷ See for more background and other uses of the idea of paradigms in theology and religious studies: Van Rompaey, "A Further Exploration of the Use of the Idea of Paradigm Shifts in Theology and Religious Studies."

²⁸ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, xlii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 17–18 & 24 & 37.

Consequently, science emerges as a cumulative enterprise. Researchers do not aim to dismantle their paradigm; rather, they work within it, addressing problems through what Kuhn terms a “puzzle-solving activity”. However, new or unexpected phenomena sometimes emerge and challenge a paradigm profoundly.³⁰ In his words: “Discovery commences with the awareness of anomaly, i.e., with the recognition that nature has somehow violated the paradigm-induced expectations that govern normal science. It then continues with a more or less extended exploration of the area of anomaly.”³¹ And while Kuhn is again very much focused on hard sciences, in the field of theology, it is not hard to imagine how certain “paradigm-induced expectations” are violated, and how certain practices, ideas, or convictions, in for, example the life of the Catholic Church today, may seem revolutionary because they are anomalous. Kuhn also calls these revolutions in science, “tradition-shattering complements to the tradition-bound activity of normal science”.³²

As already briefly noted, Pope Francis has at times acted in ways that are markedly disruptive of established traditions. Nevertheless, the Church remains deeply bound to its spiritual and theological heritage, which helps explain why the concept of paradigm shifts in theology is generally understood in non-revolutionary terms. A revolutionary understanding would imply definitive ruptures in what is handed on, something the Church seeks to avoid.³³

Nevertheless, although tradition is generally understood as the passing on of revealed truths, which is important, Mark Wynn highlights some of its more simplistic interpretations. He writes that “the handing on of a tradition will call for more than simply the verbatim repetition of earlier formulations of the tradition”.³⁴ Especially in Catholic theology, there is the understanding of Tradition as the “living transmission, accomplished in the Holy Spirit” of “doctrine, life and worship”.³⁵ And this can be understood as Tradition with capital T, but there are also traditions (with small t), called “various theological, disciplinary, liturgical, or devotional traditions, born in the local churches over time”.³⁶ While there is not only one way of thinking about t/Tradition, what Kuhn describes would be

³⁰ Ibid., 52 ff.

³¹ Ibid., 53.

³² Ibid., 6.

³³ See footnote 25 for this understanding as non-revolutionary paradigm shifts.

One can also think of the concepts “a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture” and “hermeneutic of reform” used by Pope Benedict XVI in the discussion of the Second Vatican Council.

³⁴ Wynn, “Tradition,” 127.

³⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), n° 78; *Dei Verbum*, n° 8.

³⁶ CCC, n° 83.

profoundly unsettling in ecclesial circles as it entails a fundamentally and radical new way of seeing everything.³⁷

In a Kuhnian understanding, unexpected phenomena or “anomalies” are normally “without any awareness of trouble, (...) fitted to one of the conceptual categories prepared by prior experience”.³⁸ This suggests that conflicts only emerge when anomalies consistently resist integration into (pre-)established patterns of expectation causing paradigms to gradually lose precision and explanatory power. Since conflicts may take time to surface, a new theory typically only begins to emerge once a paradigm’s problem-solving capacity persistently fails. Eventually, the intellectual climate becomes receptive to alternative solutions or competing theoretical frameworks.³⁹

Again, for what concerns Catholic theology, it matters to consider within which paradigm one operates because, in the language of Kuhn, that determines both the model problems and their respective solutions. On the one hand, to name one concrete example, a certain paradigmatic understanding of the Church that stresses its holiness will and should be shocked by the “worldwide scandals concerning sexual and other forms of abuse” as they fundamentally question “the credibility of the Catholic Church (...) and [shake] its ecclesiology to its foundations”, in the words of Mayer.⁴⁰ Some of the experiences that have emerged in recent years and decades (from being silenced) fundamentally undermine tradition-bound activity and they cannot simply be fitted in the already existing structures.

On the other hand, and concerning a different topic, the way the Church thinks about people’s identity is challenged by how people shape their identities today. Taylor, for example, while raising critical philosophical questions on what it means to be authentically oneself, shows how it has become more common today to believe that people in homosexual relations “shouldn’t feel themselves embarked on a lesser, less worthy path [to sexual fulfilment]”.⁴¹ And while Taylor is significantly more open on this issue than the official position of the Catholic Church, he emphasises, in line with the previous observation of choking off questions, that a conversation between different parties becomes difficult if one does not accept “the modern understanding of authenticity, with its notion of difference, originality, of the acceptance of diversity”.⁴² In Kuhnian terms, and relevant for the discussions on identity and the holiness of the Church, people operating

³⁷ In this regard, it is necessary to mention the work of Yves Congar, who has written extensively on reform and tradition. See, Congar, *La tradition et la vie de l'Eglise*.

³⁸ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 63.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 75–76.

⁴⁰ Mayer, “On the Way to Renewed Synodality,” 177.

⁴¹ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 37.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 37.

within different paradigms do not see or experience the same things. Even more, it is, again from a Kuhnian perspective, perfectly understandable that each of the conversation partners tries to make sense of what they see or experience by integrating the other's experience in the categories and expectations they already have. This explains why some conversations seem to be talking at cross-purposes, and why there can be no meaningful exchange between people with different paradigms. People perceive and experience things differently, and use different tools to investigate certain "facts".

For Kuhn overall, a paradigm influences what one sees and what one can study. The emergence of a new paradigm equips researchers with fresh instruments and conceptual frameworks, enabling them to reinterpret observations and identify novel sources of information. During periods of scientific revolution, when anomalies persist and the old paradigm falters, scholars often employ existing tools in unexpected contexts, thereby uncovering new phenomena or viewing familiar ones from a radically different perspective.⁴³ It goes without saying that Kuhn's insights give rise to a far less stable conception of science while still being cumulative. His work emphasizes the radical transformations brought about by new paradigms.

Kuhn also emphasises how difficult it is to recognise the full extent of the impact of historical paradigm shifts. Within a certain paradigm, it is common to base beliefs and current paradigms on authoritative sources that obscure the revolutionary evolution of science. Most people acquire knowledge about a specific scientific paradigm through textbooks. They efficiently introduce novices to the language and rules of the paradigm. For Kuhn, a textbook does not need to explain the historical developments or scientific revolutions to efficiently introduce new practitioners. Whenever a paradigm shift occurs, textbooks are adapted accordingly to meet the needs of introducing new readers and researchers. It is this process of rewriting, and the efficient introduction to the field of study, which disguises the revolutionary nature of science. Only those who have experienced a scientific revolution can then truly grasp its full magnitude.⁴⁴

This is slightly different for the students in the humanities who are generally actively introduced to the history of their field, and they are made more aware of the variety of schools of thought within these fields.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, there remains a temptation to introduce students as efficiently as possible to the specific paradigm they will operate in, without bothering them with a long historical overview. In the words of Kuhn:

⁴³ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 111–12.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 135–38.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 164–65.

“Scientists are not, of course, the only group that tends to see its discipline’s past developing linearly toward its present vantage. The temptation to write history backward is both omnipresent and perennial. But scientists are more affected by the temptation to rewrite history, partly because the results of scientific research show no obvious dependence upon the historical context of the inquiry, and partly because, except during crisis and revolution, the scientist’s contemporary position seems so secure.”⁴⁶

One direct consequence of Kuhn’s revolutionary model of scientific development is that earlier generations asked different questions, employed distinct methodologies and tools, and consequently arrived at alternative solutions or answers. They simply could not do otherwise. The concept of generation, in turn, is also theologically interesting. As Pope Francis has highlighted and commented upon in his post-synodal exhortation *Christus vivit*, there are different generations within families. However, “generation” can also have another meaning. There are generational shifts within the clergy. To give one example: A 2025 report from *The Catholic Project* revealed significant differences between ordination cohorts. 77 per cent of priests ordained before 1980 prioritised synodality, compared to just 29 per cent of those ordained in 2000 or later. One possible reason for this is that they have been shaped by different theological or ecclesiological paradigms, which influence their perception of the Church and their own role within it.⁴⁷ Once again, it shows how Kuhn helps to understand the different theological positions of younger and older priests in very concrete terms.

Overall, for Kuhn, resistance to the emergence of a new paradigm is both expected and legitimate; it is not merely reluctance on the part of scientists to admit error, but it is rather an expression of the deep commitment to the existing framework that has proven its value for a certain time and that has helped to solve scientific problems. At the point where allegiances come under excessive pressure, Kuhn resorts to an almost religious vocabulary to describe what takes place:

“The transfer of allegiance from paradigm to paradigm is a conversion experience that cannot be forced. Lifelong resistance, particularly from those whose productive careers have committed them to an older tradition of normal science, is not a violation of scientific standards but an index to the nature of scientific research itself.”⁴⁸

Kuhn concludes that it is always possible to identify individuals who resisted a shift in paradigm longer than what is considered reasonable by the others. However, this does not imply that their stance is illogical or unscientific. At the same

⁴⁶ Ibid., 137.

⁴⁷ Vaidyanathan et al., “Morale, Leadership, and Pastoral Priorities,” 16.

⁴⁸ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 150–51.

time, he also writes that the last scientist to resist conversion to the new paradigm excludes themselves from the community and ceases to be a scientist in the strictest sense.⁴⁹ Kuhn also repeatedly emphasises that paradigms are precisely what make the natural sciences so productive. As long as a paradigm's basic assumptions remain intact, research proceeds efficiently and cumulatively. Yet this efficiency comes at a cost. When a paradigm is eventually (too) fundamentally challenged, scientists lack the conceptual tools to interpret the anomalies. Paradigm shifts, as he indicates, typically occur when the problem-solving capacity within the existing paradigm persistently fails, creating openness to alternatives. This explains why new paradigms are more likely to emerge among younger members of the scientific community. They have not yet resolved the many problems from within the paradigm that is then under pressure. Since a paradigm shift should lead to improved problem-solving skills or greater simplicity, younger researchers may more easily recognize the benefits of a new paradigm due to their lack of attachment to the previous one.⁵⁰

"Seeking with new tools"

Although Kuhn's insights originate in the natural sciences, they also shed light on why theological communities resist change. While theology may not primarily aim at problem-solving in the strictest sense, it nonetheless operates within deeply entrenched practices, convictions, and interpretive frameworks that function as paradigms, shaping perception, determining what counts as meaningful, and governing the inclusion or exclusion of experiences (i.e. anomalies).

Such paradigmatic structures explain why innovation often encounters resistance. Nevertheless, it does not rule out the possibility that the younger generation adheres (again) to older or previous paradigms. Against this backdrop, I return to Taylor's observation that the Catholic Church often finds it difficult to engage in genuine dialogue with the contemporary world. According to Taylor, Church officials still speak as if they are giving "obvious answers to basic questions that any normal person of good will would agree on".⁵¹ And some people like that. However, for Taylor, there is a problem when this is combined with the conviction of some religious leaders that "searching in our faith [is] secondary, if not quite superfluous, while the dimension of getting the absolutely certain and correct answers right is the crucial one",⁵² this accounts for a highly non-revolutionary approach to theology. Here, Taylor offers a scathing critique of a particular mode of doing theology, one marked by an anxious clinging to established certainties. At the same time, it is also a paradigmatic way because, as Kuhn would

⁴⁹ Ibid., 158.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 165–66.

⁵¹ Taylor, "The Church Speaks - to Whom?," 19.

⁵² Ibid., 19.

argue, normal science “does not aim at novelties of fact or theory”, because that undermines the cumulative effort of the science.⁵³

Inspired by Kuhn, previous research that I conducted with junior colleagues suggests that paying attention to what remains hidden, whether because it defies paradigm-driven expectations or has been deliberately overlooked, inevitably raises profoundly challenging and often unsettling questions.⁵⁴ We looked at what Kuhn called an “anomaly induced ‘crisis’”, and how a crisis “simultaneously loosens the stereotypes and provides the incremental data necessary for a fundamental paradigm shift”.⁵⁵ In this collaboration, church historian Maite De Beukeleer argued that “gender aspects are not always fully integrated in religious historiography, and women are often seen as a separate topic that needs separate attention”.⁵⁶ De Beukeleer shows how women’s history, gender history, and feminist history were slower to be integrated in religious studies and church history compared to the other fields of the humanities. The paradigm shift anticipated by some scholars regarding the increased attention to women in historical studies did not unfold uniformly across the humanities; theology and religious studies, in particular, proved among the least responsive.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, women’s stories are hiding in plain sight because they are integrally part of the life of the Church.

In a similar way, theologian Hannah James devoted attention to the topics of de-conversion and religious trauma.⁵⁸ Trauma is often not visible, but it does shape people’s lives. James looks closely “at those experiences that are otherwise easily ignored (...) by attending to the trauma, and reading it through the lens of the parable of the good Samaritan”, she thus “challenges the way churches or faith communities traditionally include or exclude people”.⁵⁹ By carefully attending the religious trauma inflicted by churches on people, James challenges traditional practices because “if, as a church, we care about the suffering of others - as Jesus did in his personal ministry - we must be committed to a person’s stability, wholeness, and health, even if this means that they must journey outside of the church”.⁶⁰ It goes without saying that the Catholic Church still has a considerable

⁵³ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 52.

⁵⁴ Van Rompaey, De Beukeleer, and James, “Embracing the Anomalies, Embracing What Is Invisible.”

⁵⁵ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 89.

⁵⁶ De Beukeleer, “Did We Break the Stained-Glass Ceiling Yet?,” 77.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 77–78.

⁵⁸ James, “A Theological Response to Religious Trauma,” 84–85.

⁵⁹ Van Rompaey, “Concluding Remarks: A Kuhnian Understanding, Gender, and Trauma,” 90.

⁶⁰ James, “A Theological Response to Religious Trauma,” 89.

progress to make in this regard, as the testimonies of victims and survivors of sexual abuse make painfully clear.⁶¹

By means of conclusion: the need for further discussion

Evidently, many of the questions raised in this chapter are not entirely new. There is the question of Michael J. Lacey on “how does the church make up its mind, and how does it change its mind when it needs to?”⁶² Is the Church, or are those responsible for the Church, “capable of self-criticism and growth in wisdom”?⁶³ Especially in light of Taylor’s call to take questions seriously, it is notable that the Catholic Church still primarily tends toward providing answers. By way of conclusion, however, and in view of the preceding arguments, I will suggest that this need not always be the case.

Gerard Mannion in 2011, for example, envisioned a strong and constructive role for the Magisterium within theological debates, he does not necessarily see a limiting role. Mannion carefully explains and qualifies what he expects from the Magisterium in particular and from the Church more broadly. The Church needs a “more existentially oriented and humble (both in existential and epistemological terms) account of what the quest for Christian truth entails and, therefore, an understanding and exercise of magisterium complementary to this”.⁶⁴ This suggests that Mannion believes church leaders can play a positive role because, as he says, “there is no shortcut to the truth”.⁶⁵ The Magisterium’s role is precisely to avoid simplistic shortcuts, such as one-size-fits-all solutions or take-it-or-leave-it answers, and to serve the ongoing pursuit of truth. Fulfilling this role requires not only openness to questions but also an active commitment to encouraging and facilitating the study of difficult issues. Those entrusted with authority should therefore resist shallow, premature, or overly convenient responses, cultivating instead a culture of rigorous inquiry and authentic dialogue.⁶⁶

Mannion succinctly summarizes this as: “The role of the Magisterium is to keep us talking, thinking and praying about what is central to our faith, as we journey towards the one who is beyond all words.”⁶⁷ While written before the pontificate of Pope Francis and his emphasis on synodality, Mannion’s description comes close to a synodal and prophetic theology. This is in line with what Italian theologian Serena Noceti wrote on the reform of the Church. She emphasises that

⁶¹ James’s reflections do not pertain to the Catholic Church directly, yet the underlying logic of her argument exhibits a clear parallel.

⁶² Lacey, “Prologue: The Problem of Authority and Its Limits,” 14.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁴ Mannion, “A Teaching Church That Learns?,” 162.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 163. Mannion quotes from an article from Timothy Radcliffe in *The Tablet*: Radcliffe, “How to Discover What We Believe,” 13.

⁶⁷ Mannion, “A Teaching Church That Learns?,” 163.

synodality is about the synergy of the magisterium and the whole people of God who share in the royal, prophetic, and priestly office. They understand the gospel together, in history, while reading the signs of the times together.⁶⁸ This does not mean that anything goes; rather, it is an argument for a shared quest for truth.

To conclude, I emphasise that the renewal of Catholic theology proposed here lies not in generating ever more answers, but in recovering the openness and vitality of genuine questioning. These questions particularly arise where anomalies put pressure on tradition-bound expectations. By framing the discussion in Kuhn's understanding of paradigms, it has become clearer how theology, in comparable ways as the hard sciences, operates within paradigms that determine not only what is visible, but also which problems are considered 'solvable' and by which methods. When persistent anomalies arise, as in the Church's confrontation with abuse or with shifting understandings of identity, the reflex to preserve business-as-usual can silence the very inquiries that would lead to deeper truth and understanding. In such moments, a community's "mopping up"-approach can expose the outlived viability of its paradigm. In other words, failing to do justice to the 'anomaly' of people's lives, mopping them up to preserve a paradigm at all costs, signals failure of the paradigm. The failure of a paradigm then points to a need for fresh theological instruments and concepts, new perspectives, and an overall willingness to perceive differently.

Within this horizon, supported by the insights of Kuhn, I have highlighted the possible constructive role of young and/or junior scholars. As they are often not yet too deeply invested in the cumulative practices and insights of a paradigm under strain, they continue to raise questions. They often discern with greater clarity the gains in explanatory power and simplicity that a new framework can offer. Their contribution is not merely generational because that would easily turn into agism, but it is methodological and profoundly theological. They can help to loosen stereotypes, they can assist in uncovering what has been hiding or what has been hidden in plain sight, and they will sometimes reconfigure the field's questions. At the same time, it is precisely in this area that the comparison between Kuhn's insights and theology, or more specifically ecclesial life, reaches its limits. This is because younger generations in the Church are not unanimously or automatically in favour of change. As research on generational attitudes among priests in the USA has shown, they can be considerably more conservative, holding on to previous paradigms?⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Noceti, *Reforming the Church*, 12.

⁶⁹ I cannot examine in detail the reasons why they do so here. I merely highlight a few elements, drawing on the feminist critique of Sara Ahmed, who emphasizes the greater likelihood that those who "fit" a system will survive within it, and the corresponding marginalization of those who do not. She also points to the difficulty of reforming structures that resist change and to the common tendency to preserve existing worlds to safeguard one's privileges. *Mutatis mutandis*, might young priests fear losing privilege, power, or a sense

The chapter also argued for a synodal form of theology, albeit it more indirectly. As urged by Pope Francis, synodality reorients theology from closed systems to practices of listening, dialogue, and discernment. While ATP reframed the task of theology as a common journey, not in defence of pre-packaged certainties, I argued that a more systematic engagement with the insights of Kuhn would yield an even more challenging picture. Theologically, the magisterium can have a vital responsibility. It is its responsibility not to resolve complexity prematurely but to sustain ongoing inquiry. This applies equally to intricate questions concerning what it means to be Catholic, European, or young, and how these identities intersect. In short, the Church is called to be a learning and listening community, one that preserves the conditions under which truth can emerge through communal, patient discernment. It follows almost naturally that if the magisterium is to serve this task of fostering questions, it must itself be exercised in a genuinely synodal manner.

If theology is to meet today's world with integrity and credibility, it must accept that paradigm shifts, while also disruptive, are often how faith comes to see anew. The way forward, then, is neither to become a "booster" or a "knocker" of current developments of contemporary questions or culture. These words are Taylor's, and he means that, contrary to the boosters of modern culture, he does "not believe that everything is as it should be in this culture". However, and unlike the knockers, he thinks that in the discussions he studies "authenticity should be taken seriously as a moral ideal" and that people can and should be able to authentically question who they are and how they shape their identity.⁷⁰ Catholics in general, and the junior scholars in this volume in particular should, to use again Taylor's words, "gradually find [their] voice from within the achievements of modernity".⁷¹ Whether they succeed is ultimately for the reader to decide.

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of identity? See, for the overall discussion of change and resistance to change: Ahmed, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*.

⁷⁰ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 22–23.

⁷¹ Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?," 36.

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PART I: YOUNG CATHOLICS IN EUROPE BETWEEN THE WORD OF GOD AND THE WORLD OF AI

FROM SILENCE TO SURVIVAL: BATHSHEBA, FEMINIST/WOMANIST HERME-NEUTICS, AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN CHRISTIANITY

Anne Marie Foster

Abstract

In this chapter I examine the story of Bathsheba located in 2 Samuel 11-12 and 1 Kings 1-2 as a theological site where questions of power, silence, trauma, and survival converge for contemporary European Christianity. In the wake of widespread revelations of clerical sexual abuse and institutional concealment across Europe, the interpretation of biblical texts that have shaped Christian imagination demands renewed ethical scrutiny. I will focus on the literary dynamics of plot, time, space, and characterization, this study first offers a narrative-critical analysis that foregrounds the structural silences surrounding Bathsheba in 2 Samuel and her re-emergence as a politically active figure in 1 Kings. I pay particular attention to narrative gaps, temporal compression, and spatial asymmetries that privilege David's moral drama while marginalizing Bathsheba's experience. Building on this analysis I situate traditional or hegemonic readings which have often been centred on David's sin and repentance as a dominant interpretive baseline that has historically minimized gendered violence and normalized patriarchal authority.

In dialogue with feminist and womanist scholarship, especially the work of J. Cheryl Exum, Sara M. Koenig, and Wilda C. Gafney, I argue that Bathsheba's story can be reread as a narrative of violation, endurance, and political transformation. Feminist hermeneutics expose the ethical cost of textual and interpretive silences, while womanist midrash imaginatively restores voice and dignity to a figure constrained by androcentric narration. I argue that such rereadings are not merely academic exercises but contribute to a broader project of ecclesial repair. By attending to silenced voices within Scripture, European Christian communities are invited to reconsider inherited interpretive habits and to cultivate theological practices marked by listening, accountability, and justice. Bathsheba thus becomes a figure through whom trauma and hope are held in tension, offering a paradigm for a church seeking transformation after silence.

Introduction

Over the last number of years, Christianity in Europe is experiencing a moral and theological examination. Multiple national enquiries, independent investigations, and survivor testimonies, have revealed systemic sexual abuse within Catholic

and Protestant churches.¹ These widespread investigations and testimonies have brought to the foreground multiple institutional failures. Many places in Europe such as, Ireland, the United Kingdom, France, Portugal, The Netherlands, and Germany have released reports and documents which show the scale of the abuse as well as institutional complicity. Christianity must now acknowledge its participation in cultures of silence, patriarchal authority, and theological frameworks that have caused untold amounts of harm.

One way of acknowledging these participations is through our exegetical examination of Scripture, which has shaped Christian imagination for almost two thousand years. However, it is important to note that the Bible is not a neutral text, and those who read it bring their own perspectives to the text also. Recognizing the Bible as a Sacred text which shapes the foundation of Christian faith, it may be startling to discover that it is also a source through which storytelling normalizes the silencing and marginalization of women. A feminist reading of scripture is carried out with a hermeneutic of suspicion of patriarchal systems of power. Womanist hermeneutics on the other hand center the lived experiences of Black women, paying particular attention to race, class, and gender. Feminist and womanist scholars argue that biblical narratives have over time normalized patriarchal power. Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror* establishes a foundational model by reading biblical stories of violence against women as moral and theological indictments of patriarchy itself.² Wilda C. Gafney's work in *Womanist Midrash*³ reframes the story as sexual exploitation by a powerful monarch.

Feminist and womanist scholarship argue that this normalizing of patriarchal power is weaved into narrative silences, and gaps that surround the female characters of these biblical narratives.⁴ Both feminist and womanist scholarship argues that these silences, gaps, and ambiguities surrounding female biblical characters have profound theological consequences for contemporary readers. Reading scripture and participating in liturgical events, communities are willingly or unwillingly replicating these erasures within their own communities. This is particularly evident in biblical narratives where sexual violence is central to a story but remains unacknowledged or brushed over. The story of Bathsheba spread across 2 Samuel and 1 Kings,⁵ I believe offers a striking case study of this dynamic.

¹ To read more on this, see *The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse*, Roman Catholic Church Investigation Report; Report by Commission of Investigation into Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin.

² Trible, *Texts of Terror Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*.

³ Gafney, *Womanist Midrash A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*.

⁴ This holds true for many other stories and myths, but these fall outside the scope of this research.

⁵ *Revised New Jerusalem Bible*.

Traditional or hegemonic reading of 2 Samuel 11-12 has typically centred David, his sin, and his later repentance at the centre of the narrative. By doing this Bathsheba has been depicted as a passive character who is there as a foil, or a narrative tool to serve the plot. More often than not Bathsheba has been depicted as an adulteress, who seduces the king, thus portraying her as someone who is morally suspect. Although appearing as a minor character in a much larger narrative, Bathsheba has survived through the centuries. She is often the focus of preaching, art, and theology, which reinforces cultures of silence around sexual violence. Bathsheba, over time has been depicted quite differently. Gaps surrounding Bathsheba, according to Sara M. Koenig have been filled in differently through text, art, and film.⁶ Koenig states that “unlike the Jewish interpreters, the church fathers did blame Bathsheba for David’s sins, and their exegesis is the beginning of a trajectory of negative characterizations of her.”⁷ Hegemonic readings, centre David’s moral journey, whilst ignoring what Bathsheba has had to endure in the narrative. In contrast, feminist and womanist interpreters have again examined Bathsheba’s story to expose both the patriarchal assumptions embedded in the text and the theological implications of those assumptions for today’s church.

This chapter argues that feminist and womanist hermeneutics provide critical frameworks for reading Bathsheba in ways that align with both the ethical and theological demands of a European Christian community that is now in trauma recovery mode. These frameworks explore how feminist and womanist hermeneutics, exemplified in the work of J. Cheryl Exum, Sara M. Koenig, and Wilda C. Gafney, offer critical resources for a new European Christianity, one that is mindful of silenced voices, answerable to survivors, and open to the possibility of transformation through reading of biblical texts. These hermeneutical approaches aim to reimagine Bathsheba as a figure of resistance and survival, rather than a passive object of David’s narrative. These frameworks serve as a model for ethical repair, conveying ways in which communities might reconstruct theological identity, after many decades of institutional harm. Before turning to feminist and womanist re-interpretations, it is first necessary to consider how the silence itself functions. A closer examination of the literary shape of 2 Samuel 11-12 and 1 Kings 1-2 allows the patterns of silence, agency, and power to emerge from within the text. It is through this narrative critical lens that the foundations of later hegemonic, feminist and womanist readings will become visible.

The Bathsheba narrative shows ways in which women are silenced in Scripture. Bathsheba’s story demonstrates one of the ways in which Christian communities have developed interpretive frameworks that have ignored trauma, normalized silences in the narrative, and allowed for the erasure of women from their own

⁶ To read more, see Koenig, *Bathsheba Survives*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

stories. Unchallenged engagement with Scripture through the centuries has allowed the patriarchy to shape our understanding of biblical texts. This has led to the narrative becoming much more than an ancient story, instead becoming a lens through which Christian communities are now morally obliged to confront the silences, gaps, and ambiguities found within the narrative. Feminist and womanist hermeneutics form an ethical framework that allows the reader to repair the harmful interpretations of the narrative. It will be through this ethical approach the church can begin to transition from an institution complicit in silence, to one that is rooted in listening, accountability, and transformation.

Narrative Critical Analysis of 2 Samuel 11-12 and 1 Kings 1-2

Introduction

The biblical texts of 2 Samuel 11-12 and 1 Kings 1-2 present a compelling narrative arc which is centred around biblical characters Bathsheba and David. When read together these two stories form a cohesive unit which follows the transformation of Israel's monarchy, and in particular the role of Bathsheba in this transformation. This study will offer a narrative critical analysis of 2 Samuel 11-12 and 1 Kings 1-2. It will focus on many components of narrative analysis such as plot and structure, time and narrative pace, space and setting, and characters and characterization. Following the insights of scholars such as Shimon Bar-Efrat,⁸ and Robert Alter,⁹ the analysis foregrounds the ways in which biblical narrative operates through gaps, ambiguities, and rhetorical devices that guide reader judgment and theological reflection. Central to this analysis is the development shift of Bathsheba who will move from a passive and voiceless figure in 2 Samuel to a politically empowered character in 1 Kings. Bathsheba's character development will contrast that of David's. David, we shall see, will fall from a powerful king to a penitent sinner, and later in 1 Kings will be viewed as a weak old man, while Bathsheba in 1 Kings will be characterized as a political leader.

Paying very close attention to narrative structure and rhetorical form, this analysis will examine how the narrator of 2 Samuel and 1 Kings constructs meaning through what is said, as well as what is not said. It will pay particular attention to where gaps and ambiguities begin to occur in the narrative. This invites the reader to pay attention to what is not being said or characterized as well as what is.

Plot and Structure

To understand the plot and structure of a story is to recognise the plot of a narrative as a "summary or paraphrase of the story, chapter-by-chapter or scene-by-scene."¹⁰ According to Shimon Bar-Efrat,

⁸ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*.

⁹ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.

¹⁰ Bro Larsen, "Plot," 98.

“the plot of a narrative is constructed as a meaningful chain of interconnected events. This is achieved by careful selection, entailing the omission of any incident which does not fit in logically with the planned development of the plot. The plot serves to organize events in such a way as to arouse the reader’s interest and emotional involvement while at the same time as imbuing the events with meaning.”¹¹

Daniel Marguerat and Yvan Bourquin understand plot to be a “systematization of the events which make up the story: these events are linked together by a causal link (configuration) and inserted into a chronological process (sequence of events).”¹² They argue that plot serves as a “unifying structure which links the various happenings in the story and organises them into a continuous account.”¹³ Thus, plot can be considered an ordering of events which tell a story in either a chronological sequence, or by cause and effect links.

Throughout the story of Bathsheba and David it is evident that there are many gaps and ambiguities. For example, 2 Samuel 12, where we are told David lays with Bathsheba, conveys a moral crisis. What does it mean to lay with her? It is clear from her introduction into the story that David had no right to get close to Bathsheba. Why would he do this? Was Bathsheba a willing participant even though she was married? All these questions highlight that there are many gaps and ambiguities in this story. Meir Sternberg claims that there are a set of questions that need to be asked when reading to understand the world of the story. Sternberg argues that:

“to understand a literary work, we have to answer, in the course of reading, a series of such questions as: What is happening or has happened, and why? What connects the present event or situation to what went before, and how do both relate to what will come after? What are the features, motives, or designs of this or that character? How does he view his fellow characters? And what norms govern the existence and conduct of all?”¹⁴

Sternberg’s recognition of gaps in the story demonstrates how the narrative omits emotional detail. He argues that the whitewashing of the Bathsheba and David story by many scholars, shows that if one cannot ignore something they are willing to minimize it.¹⁵ Sternberg claims “this whitewashing still leaves unexplained the sharp rebuke delivered by the prophet Nathan.”¹⁶ Sternberg argues that no

¹¹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 93.

¹² Marguerat and Bourquin, *How to Read Bible Stories*, 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁴ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 186.

¹⁵ By whitewashing Sternberg means glossing over the fact that Bathsheba was already married and not available to David.

¹⁶ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 188.

matter how much you defend the actions of David, when it gets to Nathan's rebuke it is evident that David has been in the wrong all along and should not be defended. The rebuke from Nathan is a story within a story. This is a narrative tool which is used to frame the plot through moral allegory. According to Mark A. Bosworth "a *mise-en-abyme* is a typically short narrative embedded within a longer narrative."¹⁷ The narrator uses the story within a story device to demonstrate to the reader that David had done wrong and displeased the Lord. This device serves to show David the error of his ways.

Robert Alter's work *The Art of Biblical Narrative*¹⁸ and James Resseguie's text *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction*¹⁹ highlight how biblical narrative plots often follow a structure of complication, climax, and resolution. In 2 Samuel 11, the plot centres on David's abuse of royal power. David sees Bathsheba bathing on a rooftop, summons her, and then lays with her. After this has taken place, we are then made aware that David is complicit in the death of Uriah. It is David's desire and displeasing the Lord that introduce the central conflict. The climax of the plot is reached when the prophet Nathan arrives on the scene. Nathan's allegorical retelling of David's sin is the ultimate climax: "Why did you show contempt for the Lord, by doing what displeases him?" (2 Samuel 12:9). This leads into the resolution of the plot. David's confession and God's judgement resolve the complication theologically: "David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord.' Nathan then said to David, 'The Lord forgives your sin' (2 Samuel 12:13-14). What is lacking in this resolution, however, is Bathsheba's justice. David's divine punishment was the taking of the wives in his kingdom, "I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbour, and he shall lie with your wives in broad daylight" (2 Samuel 12:11), and also the death of his child, who was also Bathsheba's. There is no moral concern for Bathsheba in this plot. This conveys that the narrative views Bathsheba as an object to tell David's story. Although David's repentance and the death of the child provide theological and narrative closure, the unjust moral wrongdoing toward Bathsheba is not resolved.

In contrast to 2 Samuel 11, the plot of 1 Kings 1 revolves around royal succession. Bathsheba, who in 2 Samuel has no agency, in 1 Kings becomes the plot's turning point. This takes place when Adonijah declares himself the next king, "now Adonijah son of Haggith was getting above himself and saying, 'I shall be king!'" (1 Kings 1:5). Bathsheba's statement, "My lord, you swore to your servant by the Lord your God, 'Your son Solomon shall be king after me; he shall sit on my throne'" (1 Kings 17), serves as the plot's turning point. Bathsheba has moved from a present, but voiceless character, to a character who resolves the

¹⁷ Bosworth, *The Story Within a Story in Biblical Narrative*, 20.

¹⁸ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.

¹⁹ Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament*.

plot of the narrative. Bathsheba has moved from events happening to her in 2 Samuel, to leading events to take place because of her in 1 Kings.

Time and Narrative Pace

Douglas Estes states that “in order to tell a story, the storyteller must relay to the hearer or reader at least one process or event.”²⁰ When analysing time and narrative pace within the story it is important to recognise time in the story and time outside the story. Bar-Efrat states “a narrative cannot exist without time, to which it has a twofold relationship, it unfolds within time, and time unfolds within it.”²¹ External time, often known as narration time or discourse time, is time that it takes the reader to read the story. Internal time is time within the story. It is known as narrated time, or story time. The sequence of time varies from text to text. Analepsis, more commonly known as flash back, is “the narration of a story event at a point in the text after later events have been told. The narration returns as it were to a past event in the story.”²² Prolepsis, commonly known as a flash forward, tells of something which has not yet taking place in the story. Rimmon-Kenan describes it as a confrontation with a future event before its time.²³

Narrative time plays an important role in shaping the reader’s journey through the story. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s text *Narrative Fiction Contemporary Poetics*²⁴ and Douglas Estes’s *The Temporal Mechanics of the Fourth Gospel A Theory of Hermeneutical Relativity in the Gospel of John*²⁵ show that narrative time involves order, duration, and frequency. 2 Samuel 11-12 manipulates time to build tension and guide reader judgment. Time is compressed around Bathsheba’s experience and expanded around David’s. The narrative opens with a vague temporal marker “in the spring” but then swiftly shifts to deliberate pacing as David remains in Jerusalem. There is very little emotional depth from Bathsheba’s perspective when the narrative compresses David’s summoning of Bathsheba, her pregnancy which results from this summoning, and the death of her husband Uriah the Hittite. This is all in stark contrast to the dramatic unfolding of David’s guilt and his conversation with the prophet Nathan. The narrative slows down completely when Nathan allegorically retells David of his unsatisfactory behaviour and guilty actions. This deliberate slowing of the narrative pace for Nathan’s rebuke and divine judgment, serves to emphasize the theological consequences of David’s actions. This speeding up and slowing down of time in 2 Samuel is in complete contrast to the opening of 1 Kings. We are told that David is old and frail: ‘King David was now a very old man, and though wrapped in bedclothes he could not keep warm’ (1 Kings 1:1). The narrator by giving us this information

²⁰ Estes, “Time,” 41.

²¹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 141.

²² Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, p 46.

²³ To read more on this see Estes, “Time,” 43–58.

²⁴ Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*.

²⁵ Estes, *The Temporal Mechanics of the Fourth Gospel*.

regarding David's frailty is deliberately slowing the pace of the narrative. However, it is Adonijah's staging of a coup that creates an urgency in time. Bathsheba's re-entry into the narrative in 1 Kings also serves to create a new tempo. Her conversation with David interrupts the static indecision of the court and pushes the narrative forward. Bathsheba in time has moved from someone who has no control, autonomy, or agency in 2 Samuel, to a woman who acts, and has political agency in 1 Kings.

Space and Setting

Biblical narrative often uses setting not only for physical location but to encode moral and theological meaning. Susanne Luther notes that "only fragments of the narrated world are provided through the words of the narrator and characters of the story."²⁶ She argues that the space of the story must in some way be compatible with the reader's world. Luther believes "the reader must be able to draw on their normal experience of space in some regions of the narrative world."²⁷ Estes's and Alter's observations on spatial dynamics within the narrative invite the reader to examine how space and setting can be used both theologically and rhetorically. In 2 Samuel spatial dynamics serve to underscore the shift in Bathsheba's role. David's palace is a space of power, and privilege. David, in the narrative, has complete power and control over Bathsheba. It is he who sees her bathing on the rooftop. We are not told that she can see him. This act of voyeurism is a violation on David's part. Bathsheba is unaware that she is being watched by David. The spatial dynamics in this narrative very much favour David. After summoning Bathsheba, she is brought to David's private chamber. And later when her husband is killed, Bathsheba is moved into David's house. She is taken away from her own space, and now belongs to David in his space. There is a shift in spatial dynamics in 1 Kings. Bathsheba has now become the one to enter David's private space. "Bathsheba went to the king in his room" (1 Kings 1:15), with intent and purpose. Spatially Bathsheba has now become a person of authority. She has moved beyond passivity, and has become a participant in political rituals. This is further affirmed when Solomon places her on a seat at his right-hand side. When placed at the king's right-hand side, Bathsheba is now seen as a symbol of royalty. Bathsheba has transitioned from a woman who has been exploited in 2 Samuel, to a woman of wisdom, and power in 1 Kings.

Characters and Characterization

Biblical characters are developed through actions and dialogue. Marguerat and Bourquin claim character is "an individual or collective figure in the narrative, assuming a role in the plot."²⁸ Rimmon-Kenan states that in the story "character is a construct put together by the reader from various indications dispersed

²⁶ Luther, "Space," 59.

²⁷ Ibid., 60.

²⁸ Marguerat and Bourquin, *How to Read Bible Stories*, 60.

throughout the text.”²⁹ Rimmon-Kenan and Resseguie believe that characterization of biblical figures is carried out through speech, actions, and narrative silences. It is evident that characterization in 2 Samuel is vastly different to characterization in 1 Kings. Bathsheba is an almost silent flat character in 2 Samuel. The only time Bathsheba’s voice is heard is when she sends word to David that she is pregnant. She is introduced by her relation to men in the narrative as the “daughter of Eliam and wife of Uriah the Hittite” (2 Samuel 11:3). It is worth noting that even after she marries David, she is still referred to as “Uriah’s wife” in 2 Samuel 12. The reader is not privy to her grief when her husband and child die. We are simply told that “David comforted his wife Bathsheba” (2 Samuel 12:24).

David on the other hand is a dynamic character whose narrative arc moves from power and control to repentance and grief. The narrator allows the reader to see all of his actions; however, the reader is not given insight into David’s emotional state until the child dies, and he is confronted by the prophet Nathan. This rich characterization of David conveys how ambiguous Bathsheba’s characterization is. The gaps that are weaved throughout Bathsheba’s story invite more questions of the reader. In 1 Kings, however, Bathsheba is fully characterized through her own voice and actions. Bathsheba in Kings is presented as a political figure who speaks, reasons, and negotiates. Bathsheba now much more than an authoritative figure, has also taken on the role of mediator in 1 Kings 2:13-25. She has transitioned from a woman summoned by David in 2 Samuel, to a woman who is now honoured, and placed beside her son king Solomon in 1 Kings. Bathsheba, the voiceless objectified character, has now become an influential queen mother, who pushes the narrative forward.

The Hegemonic Script: David’s Story and Bathsheba’s Silence

Hegemony refers to the subtle, and often invisible processes by which dominant groups maintain power. The term hegemonic originates in Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci’s analysis of cultural hegemony in his work *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*.³⁰ Hegemony here refers to the subtle, and often invisible processes by which dominant groups maintain power. This occurs not only through coercion, but by shaping cultural norms, values, and assumptions so that they appear natural and universally valid.³¹ Gramsci views hegemony as a dynamic process through which a ruling class’s worldview becomes common sense. In his writings in *Prison Notebooks*³² Gramsci argues that hegemony operates when the dominant exercise leadership as well as domination. In this research, I use hegemonic readings as a kind of “control” or “baseline” because they represent the

²⁹ Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 26.

³⁰ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*.

³¹ To read more on this see Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*.

³² Ibid.

dominant interpretive tradition. It is against this baseline that other approaches such as feminist and womanist interpretation can be measured. Hegemonic interpretation refers to readings that maintain dominant social or theological power structures by appearing “natural.”

In biblical interpretation, hegemonic readings centre male experience and authority. Biblical scholar Meir Sternberg highlights narrative artistry, focusing on the irony, concealment, and moral complexity of David’s sin, but often do so from within androcentric assumptions that marginalize Bathsheba’s subjectivity. Sternberg argues that biblical narrative is characterized by a deliberate strategy of concealment and revelation. He states “a gap is a lack of information about the world – an event, motive, causal link, character trait, plot structure, law of probability – contrived by a temporal displacement.”³³ Sternberg believes that communication delivered through the narrative is revealed by what is concealed, and when it is concealed.³⁴ This results in what Exum terms “rape by the pen.”³⁵ For Exum, hegemonic interpretation has become a literary act of violation in which interpretation itself has become complicit in the silencing of women. Exum understands that the silencing of Bathsheba by both the text and the reader is a form of narrative violence. Her goal is to analyse how narrative strategies marginalize, silence, and exploit women and to offer alternative readings that reclaim their subjectivity.

Exum understands Bathsheba as reduced to a function of the male plot, her body is the site of David’s sin, and the vehicle of his dynasty. What we are never told is Bathsheba’s story. Exum claims that Bathsheba’s treatment at the hands of the androcentric biblical narrator deprives her of her voice, leaving her as an ambiguous character which creates a vulnerability around her, thus Bathsheba is not just assaulted by characters in the narrative but by later commentators. Verbs such as “sent” and “took” (2 Samuel 11:4) noted in feminist reading, demonstrate that there is a lack of consent from Bathsheba. However, Bathsheba’s story is not depicted explicitly as a rape narrative. The use of these verbs reveals that there is a dynamic of coercion rather than consent. Using verbs such as these, the silencing of women, and divine displeasure, are all indicators of violation. The power imbalance itself shows that Bathsheba is unable to consent, David is king and she is “simply” the wife of one of David’s soldiers. Labelling this encounter as adultery is a form of participation in hegemonic/traditional interpretation which obscures male violence by placing theological emphasis on divine forgiveness. This iterative reading of the text reveals how textual silence operates as both a narrative technique and an ideological device.

³³ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 235.

³⁴ Ibid., 235–236.

³⁵ Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 170.

This form of complicity mirrors the historical silence of European churches regarding sexual violence. By trying to protect perpetrators victims remain unnamed, unseen, and unheard. Preaching and sermons on David's repentance often celebrate divine forgiveness: "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Psalm 51). Theological remembrance in this way absolves David of his actions, while refusing to acknowledge Bathsheba's exploitation. David's confession redefines his actions as a moral failure rather than an act of violence acted upon Bathsheba. Preaching and remembrance in this fashion prioritizes divine forgiveness for the one who commits heinous violations, over restorative justice for the one victimized.

Exum's framework for rereading biblical texts conveys how prioritizing David over Bathsheba mirrors ecclesial strategies of concealment. Abuse scandals have revealed that communities move on without much acknowledgement, while victims remain unnamed, while perpetrators are spiritually rehabilitated. I argue that silence is a tool of power, in the church, communities, and in biblical narratives. Within the biblical narrative Bathsheba's body has become a narrative instrument. It has become the site of David's sin, as well as the instrument through which God's promise of Solomon is delivered. However, throughout all of this Bathsheba's voice remains absent. Exum suggests that the narrative has normalized or replaced female experience, at the expense of male theological drama. Thus, a hegemonic reading of the narrative as well as creating meaning in an ancient biblical text, also shapes ethical imagination within Christian communities. To read Bathsheba's story as a narrative plot device, or view her trauma as adultery, invites the contemporary reader to dismiss or ignore traumatic and violent events. If communities recognize David's sin as repentance before God, it may lead to forgiveness becoming prioritized over accountability.

Feminist Rereading: Naming Violence, Recovering Voice

Feminist hermeneutics emerged confronting silences found in the hegemonic reading of the narrative. J. Cheryl Exum, and Phyllis Trible, developed such interpretive practices that foreground women's experiences. They question the text, asking how its form and rhetoric have contributed to gendered oppression. Feminist readers insist that 2 Samuel 11 is not describing adultery, but is describing sexual violence. Exum for example argues that the words "sent" and "took" "indicate aggression on David's part."³⁶ Feminist interpretation claims that 2 Samuel 11 should not be understood as a narrative of mutual desire. Instead, it believes that David's actions should be understood as male power enacted through royal privilege. She also argues that the literary text causes violence towards its female characters. Exum notes that silences contained in the narrative perpetuate violence. Exum understands that by the text containing silences it is refusing to speak

³⁶ Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 172.

of the pain suffered by Bathsheba in the narrative. With no words spoken by Bathsheba, no insight into her feeling or emotions, and no offer of resistance, feminist reading believes that this cannot be evidence of consent, instead it should be recognized as part of the patriarchal norms of its time. By bringing to light this refusal feminist interpretation exposes the ethical implications of rereading biblical texts. Trible's work on *Texts of Terror*,³⁷ although not explicitly on Bathsheba, argues that in these terror stories women's voices are oppressed, and this silence surrounding the violence acted upon women, is itself an act of violence. This scholarship has brought to the exegetical table questions such as from who's perspective is most privileged within the narrative, and how contemporary and theological assumptions shape what we as readers of the text notice or choose to ignore.

Koenig examines both Bathsheba's survival in the narrative, and her survival to today.³⁸ Advancing feminist thought, Koenig argues that Bathsheba has become much more than an oppressed female character. Noting that she has not been erased from the narrative, like many other biblical women, Koenig believes Bathsheba has now become a mode of resistance. In her investigative work, Koenig identifies literary gaps in the narrative. She highlights subtle moments where Bathsheba acts, and speaks, showing how these moments significantly disrupt David's dominance in the narrative. A prime example of this disruption can be found in 1 Kings, where Bathsheba asserts her agency to secure her son Solomon's seat on the Davidic throne. These moments reveal that Bathsheba is more than a victim, she is a resilient figure navigating a patriarchal world. This reinterpretation highlights Bathsheba's endurance and subtle resistance in the narrative.

Koenig's attention to survival in the narrative repositions resilience in the foreground of the narrative. Her understanding of survival advances what Exum's critique makes possible. Koenig has moved beyond exposure of violence in the narrative, toward the recovery of voice. This hermeneutical shift resembles broader movements within European Christianity, where survivors of clerical abuse are seeking an invitation to participate in reform as well as recognition of the harm caused to them. For these survivors the silence needs to come to an end, and just like Bathsheba, their voices must be heard also. Feminist rereading challenges European Christianity to reconsider its own interpretive habits. In contrast to hegemonic readings that normalizes silence around trauma and sexual violence feminist theological imagination prioritizes the voices of those who have been marginalized in the narrative. Thus, feminist scholarship argues that there are ethical implications at play when we as readers attempt to interpret the biblical narrative.

³⁷ Trible, *Texts of Terror Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*.

³⁸ Koenig, *Bathsheba Survives*.

Womanist Midrash: Reimagining Bathsheba's Voice

While feminist readings expose androcentric bias, womanist hermeneutics developed by African-American scholars such as Delores Williams, Renita Weems, and Wilda C. Gafney, extend the critique by centring the experiences of Black women and marginalized communities. According to Gafney “womanist midrash is a set of interpretive practices [...] that attends to marginalized characters in biblical narratives.”³⁹ Womanist interpretation resists the patriarchal assumptions found within the text itself. In *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*,⁴⁰ Gafney constructs imaginative retellings of biblical women's stories, using rabbinic techniques of expansion to restore silenced voices. Gafney gives voice to the voiceless in the narrative. Bathsheba's story found in 2 Samuel 11-12 and 1 Kings 1-2, Gafney narrates from Bathsheba's perspective. She argues that Bathsheba is not there to entice the king, in fact Bathsheba is not available to have relations with David at all. Gafney states: “Her naming formula communicates and emphasizes she is not sexually available.”⁴¹ Bathsheba in 2 Samuel is introduced in relation to the men in her life; she is the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah. Bathsheba is presented through relational identity that situates her within conventional structures. Gafney believes David gazing upon Bathsheba's body is a wrongful act of transgression, and that Bathsheba is not simply a woman who is objectified in the narrative. Womanist interpretation, rather than treat Bathsheba as a woman who has been sexualized, returns to her dignity and agency which has been erased by the patriarchy within the narrative, and later interpretative hermeneutics.

Gafney's framework is much more than a rewrite of Bathsheba's story; it is an ethical examination of the text. She believes that this type of exegesis is a tool of resistance, that it is how we tell “the story behind the story, the story between the lines on the page.”⁴² Gafney's reparative imagination allows the reader to hear of the hurt, pain, and suffering endured by Bathsheba. Reading through this womanist lens creates a space for the reader to confront the violence embedded in the text, as well as imagining alternative futures for these women. Womanist midrash notes that ancient women had voices that the patriarchal text chose to omit. In a European context, where churches and communities are still struggling to compute with gendered and racial injustice, Gafney's womanist framework offers a model of interpretive healing, and theological reimagination. Her Midrashic exegetical approach has created a transformative reading mode which allows reading biblical texts to become a spiritual act of survival. Gafney suggests that if healing is to begin, the violence and trauma perpetrated should be named. She also believes that reconstruction of the narrative is required if we want to see those who

³⁹ Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 3.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 212.

⁴² Ibid., 4.

have been marginalized become subjects rather than objects in their story. Gafney, by giving voice to Bathsheba, and silenced women like her, is creating a renewed ecclesial consciousness that listens to those that patriarchal tradition has marginalized.

Reading Bathsheba in a European Key: Theology after Silence

To reread Bathsheba's story through a feminist or womanist lens is to take notice of Europe's ecclesial wounds. Countries such as The Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Ireland, have revealed systemic sexual abuse and institutional concealment. Reports of this abuse have made Bathsheba's experience painfully contemporary. I argue that the silence surrounding Bathsheba, her lack of consent, and her evident trauma have many similarities to church sexual abuse scandals, where clerical institutions have prioritized male authority over women's suffering. Thus, rereading and finding new meaning in Bathsheba's story has become a theological necessity, which invites a broader conversation about Europe's ecclesial crisis. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that feminist biblical interpretation must create a new model of reflection, one which reflects on oppressive strategies in the text, as well as resisting them. Schüssler Fiorenza claims that this shift transitions from "understanding the Bible as archetypal myth to understanding it as a historical prototype."⁴³ Just like the emphasis placed on David's forgiveness in 2 Samuel, church leaders have also placed emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation, to the detriment of those who have been harmed and silenced.

As European Christians if we are to approach the Bible in this light, we need to acknowledge that we are complicit in how we read and interpret scripture. As interpreters we need to read between the lines to examine what is truly said. We need to change our reading approach and focus on the experiences of survivors. To do this we need to give voice to those who have been silenced, but yet survived. Exum, in recognizing that the narrator remains silent, while depicting Bathsheba in a particular way, argues that the narrator has made readers complicit to the violence acted upon Bathsheba.⁴⁴ If we are to read Bathsheba's story through a patriarchal lens, we are repeating the same dynamics that have for so long sanctioned ecclesial abuse. We need to speak out about the patterns of power, oppression, and resistance found within the biblical narrative, and throughout history. It is our responsibility as readers of scripture, to do so ethically.

The fact that Bathsheba has remained in the narrative shows the importance of her story. Koenig notes that unlike many of the biblical women who are erased from their stories, Bathsheba has kept her place. However, she has remained, and

⁴³ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 15.

⁴⁴ Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 172–176.

it is feminist and womanist hermeneutic approaches that are removing this blame and giving her voice. Survivors of sexual violence, like Bathsheba, have endured extreme harm, but they can still continue to fight to be heard. It is these survivor stories that are revealing to us that truth will find a voice and can survive institutional suppression. Bathsheba's reappearance in 1 Kings demonstrates that Bathsheba is much more than an object of David's story. She is now a political leader, who navigates royal court. Bathsheba has now transitioned from one who is objectified, to becoming a subject with agency. Although once silenced, this does not need to remain so. Rereading Bathsheba in a European key, she has become an example of suffering and trauma, and later an act of ethical repair. To understand and pay attention Bathsheba's narrative today, is to foster and encourage a more active attentiveness to those silenced by power.

Generational Hermeneutics: Being Young, Being Catholic, Being European

For young European theologians, rereading of Bathsheba's story offers new direction as well as a new framework of understanding. Today's young members of the church have inherited a fractured church that is in crisis, but with this new hermeneutical framework will have the power to renew and rebuild from the rubble. Feminist and womanist readings show that scripture can be recovered through critical love. Gafney argues that feminist and womanist readings offer religious readers "an exegetical and hermeneutical resource that delves deeply into the canon(s) and draws on marginal and marginalized women as scriptural exemplars."⁴⁵ A justice-oriented Christianity demands this readiness and openness. Participating in scripture, whilst acknowledging those who are marginalized elevates the practice of interpretation. Bathsheba's story can be an example of silence to speech, and endurance and survival to transformation. Thus, the story of Bathsheba can become a parable for this generation and those yet to come.

Rereading Bathsheba's story is an invitation for young Christians to enter into a dialogue that allows for a deeper faith transformation. Feminist and womanist scholarship has shown us how to acknowledge patriarchy in the Bible and to face it head on. This theological framework is available to aid European theology in doing the same, as it too can confront what remains of oppressive patriarchal institutes. This framework is one of theological integrity as well as being a framework which advocates for gender justice. This is imperative as we cannot ethically proclaim Scripture to be good news, if our interpretation of it is prolonging harm. Bathsheba is a reminder that revelation occurs not just through our reading of scriptures, but through how we read them. Bathsheba's survival, as well as survivors today, have become a theological sign that proclaims that even within systems of oppression, new creation is possible.

⁴⁵ Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 2.

Conclusion: Toward a Church That Listens

Rereading Bathsheba through feminist and womanist lenses does more than reevaluate ancient history. It examines ethical boundaries and raises the ethical bar for European Christianity. Rereading highlights the narrative's gaps, ambiguities, and silences, which have been used to minimize Bathsheba's pain and suffering, while centring David's sin and divine forgiveness. Reinterpretation has invited European Christianity to challenge centuries old interpretive methods that have served to conceal violence, and normalize patriarchal authority. By drawing on Exum's emphasis on the violence of textual silence, Koenig's understanding of survival, and Gafney's resistance reading, we gain a new model for engaging scripture, one that holds trauma and hope in a productive tension. Exum, Koenig, and Gafney, have demonstrated that Bathsheba's story has now become a site where trauma and theological reimagination can overlap, exposing and healing the wounds found within the narrative. A church that reads Bathsheba responsibly, is a community that is open to what is different, and knows that what is unsaid is just as important as what is said. This active listening can be considered an act of faith. It is recognizing that Scripture is dynamic not static, and it is through listening to the text that we hear the voices of those who have survived. For Europe's young theologians, this hermeneutic of survival becomes a call to action. Ethical repair requires that Christian communities foster interpretive frameworks that attend to the voiceless, those who have been harmed, suffered trauma, and marginalized, both in the biblical narrative, and today. Employing these interpretive frameworks to scripture prioritizes the marginalized, creating a theology that restores the dignity of those harmed. This mode of interpretation foregrounds listening, and accountability, as vital components of faithful interpretation. By rereading Bathsheba's story in this manner European churches are forced to confront how we examine Scripture, how forgiveness is framed, and how communities acknowledge survivors of violence within their own communities.

Theological reframing further demands an openness to transformation. Bathsheba's shifting from one who is objectified in 2 Samuel, to an authoritative figure in 1 Kings mirrors the journey that many survivors and communities take, from marginalization to voice, and from erasure to reemergence. Bathsheba's reappearance, speech, and authority is evidence that survival can become a form of resistance. It also shows that concealed stories cannot be easily erased. To recognize Bathsheba in this way is to see that she has become much more than a figure of trauma, she has also become a figure of theological renewal. Bathsheba can be used as a guide for young Europeans in today's fractured church. Her story shows that faithfulness can include the questioning of inherited narratives. It also teaches that we can faithfully question our inherited narratives, interrogate power, and embrace interpretive practices that cultivate justice. To be "young, Catholic, and European" in the twenty-first century is to inherit not only a wounded church but also the tools to heal it. Bathsheba's story, retold through feminist and womanist

lenses, illuminates the path toward that healing, a future where interpretation becomes not an instrument of control but a practice of liberation.

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EUCHARIST-ORIENTED SUNDAY SERVICES OF THE WORD. A PASTORAL CASE STUDY PROPOSAL FOR CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN ROMAN CATHOLIC CONTEXTS

Bartłomiej Warowny

Abstract

Sunday Services of the Word have become a regular feature of the liturgical landscape across Europe. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (35,4) envisioned Bible services “where no priest is available,” yet symptoms of liturgical unconsciousness are noticed among the faithful, particularly regarding the distinction between the Eucharist and Sunday Services of the Word. Conversely, recent catechumenal experiences reveal that the Eucharist decisively shapes young adults’ faith journeys toward baptism, followed by a desire for a deeper understanding of the liturgy. Pope Francis’s *Desiderio desideravi* highlights the challenge of liturgical illiteracy, distinguishing formation *for* the liturgy from formation *by* the liturgy itself.

This paper takes as its starting point liturgical literacy as the aim of liturgical formation, the formative potential of the liturgy, and the established phenomenon of Sunday Services of the Word in varied European contexts. Far from advocating fewer Eucharistic celebrations, it reinterprets the current pastoral situation as an opportunity to cultivate liturgical literacy, deepen Eucharistic faith, and forge vital connections between liturgical participation and daily life. The central argument posits that intentionally Eucharist-oriented Services of the Word—by identifying deficits in liturgical competence and elucidating the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of the Eucharist—can foster growth in liturgical literacy. These services thus serve as a formative bridge between everyday existence and Christian life shaped by Sunday liturgy (both Service of the Word *and* Eucharist, each in its way), addressing both spiritual needs and the indispensable social mission of Catholics in contemporary Europe as a result of their participation in the liturgy. The proposal develops two case-study templates for Sunday Services of the Word with Holy Communion, tailored to frequency (once or three times monthly). Beyond developing liturgical literacy, this approach responds to the call for genuine missionary conversion, which aligns with increasingly collegial leadership in faith communities (cf. Pope Leo XIV).

Introduction

Current liturgical landscape in Europe is dynamic and complex, yet insufficiently investigated

Christian liturgy is “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed”, as indicated by *Sacrosanctum Concilium* number 10 (SC). Among the various liturgical forms, the Eucharist occupies a unique place in Christian spirituality, both for individuals and for communities (SC 10). It is a keystone expressing bonds of unity in diversity across languages, countries, cultures, and rites, which are numerous in Europe, whether historically rooted (chiefly the Byzantine rite) or present through diaspora communities (Antiochian, Chaldean, Armenian, and Coptic traditions). The celebration of the Eucharist on Sunday plays a special role in this regard (SC 106). At the same time, the Second Vatican Council recommends Bible services, especially in places “where no priest is available” (SC 35,4). This paper examines the situation of Roman Catholic liturgies and refers to the shortage of priests in many parts of Europe which has become one of the main reasons why Sunday Services of the Word have become a regular feature of the liturgical landscape in numerous European countries—especially in Western Europe.¹

At this stage, it must be noted that there is so far no large-scale, European-wide comparative study that would document and analyse where, how regularly, and on which occasions Services of the Word are celebrated, nor which dioceses have issued norms regulating such celebrations and what structural models they propose.² There are diocesan guidelines and theological-liturgical reflections, but these are generally limited to a regional scope, with mainly normative or qualitative character.³ Hence, of particular importance is a study initiated in 2019 on the

¹ Statistical trends indicating an insufficient number of ordained ministers in Europe and North America—leading to a decrease in the number of Eucharistic celebrations—formed one of the premises of O’Loughlin’s 2005 article. O’Loughlin, “How many priests do we need?”.

² Careful terminological distinctions are necessary at the outset of this proposal. “Eucharist” refers to the Sacrament of the Eucharist (i.e., Mass). “Service of the Word” denotes an *independent* Liturgy of the Word, distinct from the Liturgy of the Word as a fixed component of the Eucharist—together with the Introductory Rites, Liturgy of the Eucharist, and Concluding Rites. “Communion” and “Holy Communion” refer to the rite of Holy Communion, which constitutes an integral part of every Eucharist but may also be incorporated into the Service of the Word. Where the term *liturgy* appears without further specification, it does not refer to any particular liturgical celebration but to various forms of Christian liturgy (considered also in view of their formative potential for fostering liturgical literacy).

³ The shortage of reliable and up-to-date data on the celebration of the Service of the Word in the German-speaking context was highlighted in 2015 by Brüske, “Schwierige Wortkommunion,” 313. The particular importance of such services in German-speaking countries is evidenced by the existence of a dedicated monthly magazine, *WortGottesFeiern* (Schwabenverlag), which provides liturgical templates and materials. In the Spanish and Italian contexts, noteworthy publications include two books: González, *Vivir*; Borghi,

practice of Services of the Word in Germany and Austria, whose results were published in 2023 in a volume edited by S. Winter and A. Büssing.⁴ In reference to the outcome of W. Meurer's study, the editors point out that, over fifty years after the Council, Services of the Word in German-speaking countries have become established in the perception of the faithful as an independent liturgical form, celebrated *at least in principle* alongside the Eucharist, and not simply as a substitute for a cancelled Mass.⁵ At the European level, however, there is still no study capable of providing validated data on the reasons for introducing and celebrating Services of the Word, the extent to which these reasons are linked to priest shortages, or the typical liturgical templates employed.

For the purposes of the present paper, two premises are of particular relevance: first, the fact of celebrations of Sunday Services of the Word across Europe (particularly in its Western part), and second, the theological significance of the Eucharist as well as the categorial difference between a Biblical service as mentioned in SC 35,4 and the Eucharist.⁶ Alongside this, current debates in the German-speaking context point to questions concerning the faithful's awareness of the specific liturgical form in which they participate and to pastoral efforts to structure celebrations in such a way that different liturgical forms can be clearly distinguished.⁷ *Participation* in the liturgy, however, never means mere physical *presence*; one of the Church's primary tasks is liturgical formation, enabling the faithful to participate actively, consciously, and fruitfully in the liturgy (SC 11, 14, 19, 59). Active participation does not exhaust itself in speaking, singing, or performing functions, but rather lies in an inner co-participation in the celebrated mystery of Christ. Since the time of the Church Fathers, familiarizing the faithful

Dieci parrocchie. A paper referring to the French context has been published by: Wernert, "La communion".

⁴ Winter and Büssing, *Die Wort-Gottes-Feier*. Of major significance is the analysis of Wolfgang Meurer, which investigates the influence of Article 35,4 of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*: Meurer, *Die Wort-Gottes-Feier*.

⁵ Cf. Winter and Büssing, *Die Praxis der Wort-Gottes-Feier*, 56 f.

⁶ The existence of such celebrations services is also reflected in the publication of dedicated liturgical books. In the German-speaking context, a key reference is: Deutsches Liturgisches Institut, *Wort-Gottes-Feier*. It is currently in use in various dioceses. In Spain, major dioceses, such as Barcelona and Salamanca have issued their own guidelines and documents, for example: Aymerich, *Las Celebraciones*; Diócesis de Salamanca, *Celebraciones*.

⁷ Referring to the German-speaking debate, one might distinguish two main approaches to structuring and conceptualizing Services of the Word in comparison to the Eucharist: celebrations designed to be as different as possible (such as the "*Abenteuerland-Gottesdienste*" for families, which express creativity and participation), and those intended to be as similar to the Eucharist as possible. Benjamin Leven has addressed the possibility of confusion or indifferentism arising from these diverse liturgical forms, emphasizing the need for categorial distinction between the Eucharist and other liturgical celebrations: cf. Leven, *Quelle und Höhepunkt*.

with the meaning and structure of the liturgical rites has remained a central pastoral task. However, liturgical catechesis should not be understood merely as a duty of clergy and pastoral co-workers or as a burdensome obligation for the faithful. A recent 2025 survey of newly baptized young Catholics in France shows that the faithful themselves desire a deeper understanding of the liturgy—especially of the Eucharist. Many of them (83 %) had already attended the Eucharist before entering the catechumenate and identify it as decisive for their journey to faith.⁸

In this context, Pope Francis’s teaching on liturgical formation is particularly significant. In *Desiderio desideravi*, he speaks of two related kinds of formation: “formation *for* the liturgy” and “formation *by* the liturgy,” calling for channels of serious yet accessible formation so that all the faithful may “grow in a knowledge of the theological sense of the Liturgy” (DD 34-35) and may overcome “liturgical illiteracy” that struggles to read symbols and engage with symbolic action (DD 44).⁹ Liturgical formation thus aims at *liturgical literacy*, which can be understood as a set of competences needed for active, conscious, and fruitful participation in liturgical symbolic action.

Case Study Overview: assumptions and objectives

Starting from this papal appeal, and in awareness that my proposal is connected to delicate questions surrounding different kinds of liturgical celebrations as well as the discussions about the role and position of ordained ministers, the present paper focuses on a particular *case study* of the celebration of Sunday Services of the Word in European contexts where the Eucharist cannot always be celebrated—and explores how they might become privileged loci for liturgical formation “by” the liturgy itself. *The proposal is not intended to diminish the number of Eucharistic celebrations*; rather, it seeks to reinterpret the current pastoral situation, with its European diversity, as an opportunity for growth in liturgical literacy, deepening Eucharistic faith, practice and finally in the elementary and indispensable correlation of the participation in the liturgy and daily life.

The starting point of this proposal is the idea of ongoing liturgical formation, aimed at familiarizing participants with the spiritual wealth of the Eucharist and its transformative potential for Christian existence. This proposal argues that by identifying (core) deficits in liturgical competences among the faithful, and by explaining symbolic and spiritual elements of the Eucharist, intentionally Eucharist-oriented structure for Services of the Word can help participants grow in understanding the intrinsic connection between words, gestures, symbols, and actions of the Eucharist and their everyday lives—lives shaped, transformed, and

⁸ According to the survey conducted by *Aleteia* and *Famille Chrétienne*, 27% of respondents expressed a desire to deepen their understanding of the Eucharist: Pasquier, Nouveau bond.

⁹ Pope Francis, *Desiderio desideravi*.

renewed from the depth of Eucharistic encounter with God and the community. Furthermore, the structure of such services can help the faithful sharpen the distinction between the Eucharist and the Service of the Word, fostering a sense of the Eucharist's uniqueness while at the same time acknowledging the value and legitimate place of a Service of the Word as a true form of liturgy.

This paper therefore argues that an intentionally Eucharist-oriented design of the Service of the Word can serve as an effective pastoral instrument for renewing liturgical awareness and deepening Eucharistic faith, particularly in European contexts marked by priest shortages. The focus is on the situation and needs of the community and the individual, rather than on the character of the leader of prayer, who in our proposal is appropriately a lay person.¹⁰ When conceived and celebrated in a Eucharist-oriented way, the Service of the Word can serve as a formative bridge between everyday life and a Christian existence shaped by the Sunday Liturgy (both Service of the Word *and* Eucharist, each in its way), responding to spiritual needs and challenges as well as to the indispensable contribution of Catholics in contemporary Europe to peace and reconciliation in and between their societies.¹¹

Concretely, the paper addresses dioceses and communities in all European regions where the Eucharist cannot be celebrated every Sunday and where Services of the Word already take place. It will *first* present a model for a single Service of the Word, designed for contexts in which the Eucharist is celebrated on other Sundays, with the specific aim of helping the faithful to discover different dimensions of the Eucharistic mystery. It will *then* develop a case study of a monthly sequence of three Services of the Word, each focusing on a distinct Eucharistic aspect (a single dimension or aspect of the Eucharist as just mentioned in the first model, furthermore Meditation of the Word of God, and Eucharistic Adoration), for pastoral situations in which the Eucharist can be celebrated only once a month. This model does not advocate reducing the frequency of Eucharistic celebrations to once per month; rather, it seeks to foster gradual growth in liturgical literacy and in the capacity for active, conscious, and fruitful participation in the Eucharist thanks to a particular design of the Service of the Word. Eucharist-oriented Service of the Word might be of particular importance to young people interested in the Catholic faith as well as in the depth and variety of liturgical forms. This proposal could become even more relevant if young people will be seen not only as a *target group* of participants eager to develop and improve their personal

¹⁰ We are considering this particular scenario, given that the deacon, by virtue of the ordination, is entitled to preside over liturgical celebrations and serves as an ordinary minister of Holy Communion.

¹¹ The correlation between participation in the Eucharist and social engagement—as its inseparable consequence—has been emphasized in: Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*, 89. See also: Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 14.

liturgical literacy, but rather as a *key group* for contextualizing, leading, and detailing the liturgical draft of described services for their context, and for playing an active role in celebrations with and for others. Academic and didactic research has sufficiently demonstrated that people learn more effectively when they themselves teach or participate in teaching projects.¹² The motivation of this proposal is to work out opportunities for the faithful to become more familiar with the liturgy, thereby fulfilling the task of liturgical formation.

However, the two models presented below should not be regarded as complete, ready-to-use instructions, but rather as templates that require adaptation to the local context—such as addressing liturgical competencies previously identified on a diocesan or parish level as lacking and therefore targeted for development, as well as considering the actual possibility of celebrating the Eucharist and the Service of the Word when it is not possible to do so. The ultimate responsibility of local ecclesial authorities in liturgical decision-making must be acknowledged and respected. The need for adaptation and contextualization also extends to the question of whether the distribution of Communion should be included in the Service of the Word. Given that our proposal begins with the concept of Sunday Services of the Word oriented toward liturgical literacy—which entails a growing understanding of the Eucharist as the liturgical summit and a recognition of the categorial distinction between a Service of the Word and the Eucharist, without diminishing the significance of the former or forgetting the sacramental character of priestly ordination—we logically opt for a Service of the Word that *does* include the distribution of Communion. A contrary position can scarcely be justified in light of the perspective outlined in the foregoing proposal.

The Proposal: Eucharist-oriented Sunday Service of the Word with Holy Communion (ESW)

As noted above, our proposal consists of two models of Eucharist-oriented Services of the Word celebrated throughout the monthly cycle. In the first model we consider a single Service of the Word, designed for contexts in which the Eucharist can be celebrated on other Sundays. The second model in the following subparagraph refers to a context in which the Eucharist can be celebrated on only one Sunday in the month. The second model is to be seen as an extension of the first one.

Single ESW throughout the monthly cycle

In the first model the Eucharist can be celebrated on all Sundays of the month but one. On that Sunday the Service of the Word can be intentionally employed to deepen the faithful's liturgical competencies, thereby enabling the liturgy itself

¹² In this context, consulting the following sources and their bibliographies may prove helpful: Duran, *Learning-by-teaching*; Fiorella and Mayer, *Learning by Teaching*; Fiorella and Mayer, *The relative benefits*.

to intentionally fulfil its formative function. First, we will present what “developing liturgical literacy” entails within a single ESW. This will be followed by a proposed structure for the ESW and a concrete example illustrating the correlation among word, gesture, spiritual meaning, and everyday life, a correlation that the faithful are invited to perceive with greater clarity. Developing liturgical literacy—understood as the set of competencies required for active, conscious, and fruitful participation in liturgical action—is a formative, that is a learning process. Consequently, the design of each ESW should begin with the formulation of clear, well-defined expected learning outcomes. The examples below are framed according to revised Bloom’s Taxonomy, a hierarchical system for categorizing and formulating educational goals.¹³

Furthermore, it should be noted that the formulation of expected learning outcomes in ESW can be approached in two ways. The first approach begins with the elementary dynamics, content, and rules of the Christian liturgy; in this case, one might propose, for example, the following learning outcomes:

1. The structure of the Eucharist shapes form and rhythm of personal prayer.
Outcome example: Participants will be able to recall and articulate that the liturgical assembly is not merely a structured backdrop in which to tuck away private prayer—loosely related to the words, gestures, and inner meaning of the rites performed at the altar. Rather, they will understand that they are called to pray the Eucharist itself, appropriating its words, gestures, and structure as the very form and rhythm of personal prayer within the gathered faith community.

2. Drawing a contrast between the modern *homo faber* and the Christian *homo orans*.

Outcome example: Participants will be able to compare the everyday-life perspective of the modern individual, who often perceives himself as a maker (*homo faber*), with that of the participant in the Christian liturgy, whose orientation is not grounded in human agency but in divine initiative (*homo orans*). In the latter God is the principal agent and the faithful receive primarily. Recognizing this shift—from a stance of doer to that of receiver—constitutes a key objective of the learning process, fostering a prayerful attitude attuned to liturgical reality.

3. Emphasizing the dialogical structure of the *Novus Ordo* Mass as articulated by the Second Vatican Council.

Outcome example: The community gathered in the name of Jesus Christ—the Son of the Father and the Son of Man¹⁴—is invited to participate in the life-giving

¹³ Anderson and Krathwohl, *A Taxonomy*.

¹⁴ We employ this term due to its recurrent usage in reference to Jesus throughout the New Testament (e.g., Mk 10:45; Mt 8:20; Lk 22:48; Jn 3:13–14) and its theological significance in *Lumen gentium* 5, while acknowledging the possibility of an exclusive—though neither sole nor implicitly obligatory—interpretation of this designation.

inner Trinitarian dialogue with the Father through the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit. From this theological perspective the primary learning outcome should be the development of active, attentive listening during the Eucharist together with a spiritual engagement with the spoken texts and prayers. Specifically, participants are expected to recognize that the liturgy—especially the Eucharist—constitutes a form of God’s dialogical encounter with the Church; reflect on the insights, inner stirrings, and inspirations that the Holy Spirit yields during the celebration through the liturgical texts and Bible passages; translate these reflections into a creative phase of personal praxis, i.e., into concrete actions and attitudes that shape everyday life within one’s own milieu. The ultimate aim is to help believers to live out their vocation as “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (cf. Mt 5:13–14), integrating liturgical experience with a lived commitment to growth in faith and social witness.

4. Constructing a link between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist—expressed particularly through the orientation of one’s personal prayer after receiving Communion—with a view to foster expanded Christian engagement in the world.

Outcome example: Participants will recognize that the Opening Prayer, the readings (including the Gospel), and the Psalm furnish concrete material for personal reflection, prayer, and contemplation of one’s present and potential social engagement—especially after receiving Communion. The variety of biblical texts thus shapes the direction of thoughts and prayers during the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Consequently, the moments after receiving Communion become an intentional movement toward the highest level of Bloom’s taxonomy (creating). Participants ask themselves: “How am I called to *cooperate* with God in the world, in light of the insights I have received from the Liturgy of the Word?” A possible answer might be: “Perhaps I could lend a hand to my neighbours who are renovating their apartment.”

Another starting point for formulating specific expected learning outcomes—one that promises considerable efficacy—is an empirical study designed to identify the core liturgical competencies that require deepening within a particular local community. In this approach the process begins with a systematic analysis of the concrete needs of individual members of the community. The reference to this starting point will be placed at the conclusion of the proposal.

Having suggested possible examples of liturgical competencies that could be targeted in a single ESW and noting that these competencies may be elaborated in a two-fold manner, we now turn to the description of the ESW’s structure. Its nucleus is drawn from the Introductory Rites and the Liturgy of the Word as celebrated during the Eucharist, with the aim of developing the selected competence(s). Consequently, the Scripture readings would not follow the ordinary Sunday-by-Sunday sequence; instead, they would be chosen expressly to support the

competence under development. In the same vein, the Intercessions, the Opening Prayer, and the Prayer after Communion would be composed in direct relationship to the targeted competence, resulting in liturgical texts that are formulated in clear, accessible language and that speak to the lived reality of the concrete community.

Thus, a particular competence—articulated as a learning outcome—becomes the central thread of the ESW. Its structure would commence with the ordinary Introductory Rites (entrance procession, greeting, opening prayer), followed by the first reading and the responsorial psalm. Rather than a second reading from Scripture, we propose the inclusion of a passage from the Church Fathers or a contemporary theologian, selected for its relevance to the competence(s) in question. After the Gospel reading, the portion normally reserved for the homily would be reconceived to serve the development of the desired competence(s). This segment could take various forms, ranging from a conventional sermon to a short workshop or reflective activity specifically oriented to the chosen competence.

The design of this segment should be contextualized to the community's social composition—taking into account factors such as the size of the congregation, the age distribution of participants, and their cultural background. Furthermore, this element offers a fertile space for the creativity of the prayer leader and the pastoral team responsible for its design and implementation. The diversity of possible designs is supported by the findings of Winter and Büssing, who observed that leaders enjoy creative freedom when adapting existing liturgical templates.¹⁵ In this proposal, the permitted creative liberty is embedded within a clearly defined framework: the selected competence guides both the choice of liturgical texts and the thread of the post-Gospel segment, while still affording the prayer-leader and pastoral team space to express their creativity.

The revised homily/preaching section would be followed by the Creed, the Intercessions, the Our Father, Holy Communion, the Prayer after Communion, and finally the Blessing (using the form: “May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil, and bring us to everlasting life”).¹⁶ The service would conclude with the Dismissal.

We conclude this part with a suggestion of material that might be preached during such an ESW. The aim is to give one detailed example of an ESW focused on explaining the correlation between word, gesture, and spiritual sense, arguing for the formative power of liturgy by liturgy, ending with its influence on everyday

¹⁵ Cf. Winter and Büssing, *Die Praxis der Wort-Gottes-Feier*, 43 f.

¹⁶ This suggestion is made cognisant of Can. 766 Lay persons can be permitted to preach in a church or oratory, if necessity requires it in certain circumstances or it seems advantageous in particular cases, according to the prescripts of the conference of bishops and without prejudice to can. 767, §1.

life. Liturgy as transformative potential. As example, we take the moment of the Preparation of the Gifts, namely the words said quietly by a deacon or by a priest while pouring wine and water into the chalice: “By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”¹⁷ These words refer to the Incarnation of Christ, and their formulation is not coincidental: they echo the Opening Prayer of the Feast of the Nativity of the Lord (Daytime Mass): “O God, who wonderfully created the dignity of human nature and still more wonderfully restored it, grant, we pray, that we may share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”¹⁸ Thus, the words that are repeated at every Mass during the Preparation of the Gifts reflect the fact that not only Christ’s Passion and Death are celebrated in the Eucharist, but the Act of Salvation in its fullness. This prayer expresses humanity’s longing for closeness, and similarity to Christ as a result of sharing in the sacrament offered to us. In the Eucharist a person is granted a unique possibility of that particular proximity and inner transformation, especially through receiving Holy Communion. This longing leads to an unprecedented moment of contact with Christ in the Eucharist, while receiving His Body. It is a moment of closeness yearned for by many, which is extremely well depicted in the Gospel scene of the woman who sought to touch Jesus in hope of healing, at least to touch his cloak (cf. Mt 9:21). That scene portrays a human longing for a deeply personal, physical healing, while also noting that, as a consequence of her illness, the woman was excluded from society and consequently suffered not only physically. The spiritual perspective of expressing longing for personal closeness and healing, as described above, gives particular intensity to the very short moment of receiving, and consuming the Body of Christ. It may help spiritually accentuate those moments before Communion, during the procession, as well as after it, during one’s personal prayer, starting from the experience of unique unity with Christ—a moment of receiving His Body and thus His divinity, which He decides to share with us. Such a way of praying the Eucharist itself, that is a very conscious following of the gestures and the accompanying words—often unheard because they are meant to be said “quietly”—might have a deep impact on building an inner connection between words, gestures, their spiritual sense, and bearing fruit in everyday life.

The intensity and transformative potential of the described participation in the Eucharist may reveal its relevance in the days following, when a person struggles to transcend what binds them more closely to the first Adam while seeking to strengthen what connects them more closely to the Second.

Furthermore, a liturgical experience of that kind may become an important resource for reviving the actuality of, and remembering, one’s Christian identity—

¹⁷ USCCB, *Roman Missal*, 381.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

something that may be of great relevance, especially under the daily circumstances of a Christian who works and lives as a minority. It may shed light on the moments when the person tries to share and radiate the peace, love, light, compassion, courage, and passion for serving God, and thus become a being for others, as experienced in the liturgically celebrated pro-existence of Christ.¹⁹ All moments of struggle and prayer throughout the week might find particular anchorage in this experience of closeness made during the Eucharist. It might become a source of consolation when one confronts one's limits and insufficiency in transcending ingrained habits and everyday patterns of behaviour—when the fruits of grace appear absent (cf. Hab 3:17–18)—while also inspiring gratitude amid the subtle daily instances of growth in hope, love, selflessness, and attentiveness to others, growth attributable above all to God's grace, without excluding one's own efforts (cf. 1 Cor 15:10). That kind of participation, active and conscious, opens vast perspectives for becoming more fruitful in fulfilling one's vocation, contributing to the renewal of the surrounding reality, carrying out secular duties and activities, improving human conditions, and making interactions more human-friendly as healthy inter-dependent relations (*Gaudium et Spes*, 32, 35, 43). From this point of view, it becomes clear that the proposal does not merely aim to transfer knowledge.²⁰ It is not simply about making somebody more *literate*, nor is it a form of damage control for the phenomenon of liturgical illiteracy. No, it entails the potential for genuine spiritual and liturgical renewal of individuals and communities out of the spirit of the liturgy.

The last but not least element of enormous importance is liturgical music and singing. In particular the acknowledgement that the lyrics people pray while singing have the potential to increase formation by the liturgy. Music and singing could also be intentionally involved in developing the targeted competencies as well as deeper understanding of elements or dimensions of the Eucharist with which the individual and community should become more acquainted. The German song *Was uns die Erde Gutes spendet* could serve as an example of a song that reinforces the learning process and thus growth in liturgical competencies. In the third verse, the lyrics refer to the moment of pouring water and wine into the chalice and express it as a prayer and longing of the community: *As wine and water unite, so we enter into Christ; we will find perfection and be partakers of His divinity*. Intentional orientation toward the development of competencies has the potential to reveal new perspectives and to reinforce the formative aspect by the service through new songs and music projects. It opens another space for the

¹⁹ This term denotes a profoundly self-devoting mode of existence that became manifest in the life of Jesus. The dynamics of his existence *for others* find expression in the Eucharist and bear implications for the existential dynamics of every faithful individual. Cf. Schürmann, “‘Pro-Existenz,’” 349, 358, and 362.

²⁰ This proposal entails a mode of developing religious literacy that exceeds the purely cognitive dimension—a direction that Löffeld identifies as particularly relevant. See for this: Löffeld, “In den Signaturen des 21. Jahrhunderts,” 202–204.

active engagement of the faithful, and especially that of young Catholics, if they are encouraged and supported in composing and writing new deeply liturgical and spiritual texts.

A monthly structure of three Services of the Word and one Eucharist

The second model of the Eucharist-oriented Sunday Services of the Word with Holy Communion should be understood as an extension of the first. In this scenario we assume a pastoral situation in which only one Eucharist can take place each month. Under these circumstances our proposal suggests three Services of the Word per month, each of which refers in its own way to a distinct dimension of the Eucharist and contributes in a different manner to the development of the faithful's liturgical literacy. The first of the three liturgies is the ESW described in the previous section. The second is a Meditation on the Word of God within the Service of the Word, and the third is Eucharistic Adoration also incorporated into the Service of the Word. The Eucharist is celebrated on the Sunday that falls between the second and third Services of the Word. Consequently, the liturgical cycle follows a repeating weekly pattern: ESW, Service of the Word with Meditation on the Word of God, the Eucharist, and Service of the Word with Eucharistic Adoration. The cycle does not have to begin with the ESW in every community; it may start with any of the four celebrations. This flexibility reflects pastoral reality. If a single priest can celebrate two or three Eucharists on the same Sunday at different sites, beginning the cycle on the same date with a different type of the four celebrations allows eight to twelve communities to receive at least one Eucharist each month. What requires further clarification, however, is the precise meaning of "Meditation on the Word of God" and "Eucharistic Adoration", both of which are to be celebrated within the Service of the Word.

First, by Meditation on the Word of God we mean *lectio divina*. The *lectio divina* method of praying with Bible texts consists of four parts (reading, meditating, prayer, and contemplating). Since the Word of God is a substantial element common to both the Service of the Word and the Eucharist, the second Service of the Word in monthly structure would focus on meditating on the biblical texts that shall be used during the Eucharist the following week. This could help reflect the biblical message as an inspiration for a personal perspective on one's own life, shaping its meaning and direction. The Introductory Rites would be the same as described in the previous sub-paragraph. The main difference would be in the central part of this service, beginning after the Opening Prayer. After the "reading" portion—corresponding to its structure in the Eucharist—instead of a homily, the leader would provide an introduction to the subsequent elements of *lectio divina*. Thus, the leader would introduce to the "meditation" part or guide it in order to help individuals begin their personal interaction with the Word of God (the reference to all readings and psalms, or to a selection of them, would be up to the leader). Meditation would be followed by the two remaining phases—

“prayer” and “contemplation”—carried out individually either in silence or accompanied by silent music in the background. Everyone could interact with the biblical texts, meditate, pray, and contemplate at his or her own pace, knowing, for example, that 30 minutes are allocated for this central part of the service, of which 20 minutes are intended for individual interaction. The *lectio divina* section would conclude with the recitation of the Creed, followed by the Intercessions, the Lord’s Prayer, and the distribution of Holy Communion, ending with the Concluding Rites as described above.

Secondly, the Eucharistic Adoration on the Sunday of the week after the Eucharist would be the central element of the fourth service in the monthly structure. Its main goal is to deepen, prolong, and renew the experience of Christ’s presence and closeness in the Eucharist. In this structure, the order of Adoration that results from the Eucharist becomes evident. In this service the Introductory and Concluding Rites would not differ from the model described above. The scriptural reading would draw primarily from New Testament passages that refer to the Eucharist, and would be followed by a reading from the Church Fathers, a contemporary theologian, or a recent magisterial document—preferably one that addresses today’s vision of Christian social engagement, thereby facilitating the ecclesiological implications of the Eucharist to be reflected on a spiritual level. Thus, the correlation between the Eucharist and the social engagement of Catholics could become more evident and could serve as an object of personal and communal prayer and discernment. After the second and final reading, the time of Eucharistic Adoration would begin. As the central element of this service, it can appropriately last around 30 minutes. Its structure could be planned and carried out in different ways, according to factors such as the liturgical season. A range of possibilities is imaginable regarding the role of the prayer leader or the participants (e.g., the music team). Accordingly, the adoration could be more or less guided, with longer or shorter periods of silence, or even in complete silence (as might be appropriate during Lent). In addition to music or silence, illumination could be used intentionally to create the desired atmosphere for prayer. As a balance to the quieter adoration in Lent, the fourth service in the cycle could provide a particular opportunity to express the joy of the faith. For example, integrating liturgical dance into the adoration during Easter or around Pentecost could be considered. The time of adoration would then be followed by the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the distribution of Holy Communion, ending with the Concluding Rites as described above.

The Advantages of the proposal

Our proposal has the potential to become a timely and context-sensitive component of efforts aimed at developing the liturgical literacy of the faithful—a duty of the Church throughout the ages—whose modern urgency and actual obstacles have been stressed by Pope Francis in *Desiderio desideravi*. On the other hand, it addresses the current liturgical situation and enables the transformation of what

might be understood as a pastoral crisis into a catechetical and mystagogical opportunity. Thus, the Eucharist-oriented Service of the Word functions as a bridge that connects the celebrated liturgies of different kinds—together with their depth and renewing potential—to everyday Christian life.

First and foremost, it may enable the faithful to experience liturgical celebrations as truly dialogical encounters, where God wishes to dialogue with them personally and, at the same time, with them as a community of believers—brothers and sisters called to fulfil their vocation not merely as individuals but in collaboration and mutual care. In this way the liturgy itself can form the faithful in discovering and living the fundamental perspective of Christian faith in I-Thou-We dynamics.

This leads immediately to the second advantage: community renewal. When people develop genuine liturgical competence—understanding what is happening in the different parts of the Eucharist and the significance and influence it has on their prayer during the celebration and on their daily life afterwards—mutual perception shifts. They emerge from anonymity; they no longer merely sit in a pew but become active participants in a shared faith perspective. People acquire a basis for networking with one another, bonded by their shared faith practice, and, in turn, revitalize communities that may have become fragmented, passive, or governed by anonymity.

Subsequently, the experience of lived faith as an individual and its sharing within a community opens the door for spiritual resources to become more accessible and to flourish within, for, and beyond the community. After all, the Eucharist is not merely about personal piety; it forms us for a life of reconciliation, peace, and care for others. With this understanding, people perceive the Eucharist not as an escape from the world but as a source of courage and compassion that enables them to take the world's suffering and problems as their own (GS 1). They become better equipped to live as missionary disciples (*Evangelii gaudium* 119–121, 127). Instead of confusion among the various liturgical forms, a coherent formation journey is created—one that can be experienced only as a community, where everyone has a unique place because of their talents and opportunities. Ordained ministers and lay leaders of prayer are not to compete with each other or seek to diminish one another's role or contribution. In our proposal both types of presiders of prayer are indispensable in their uniqueness and in their possibilities for service to God and to faith communities; this has the potential to ease tensions where frustration, misunderstanding, or even conflict between clergy and laity exist.²¹

²¹ This might eventually contribute to “increasingly collegial leadership.” Pope Leo XIV, *A Fidelity that Generates the Future*, 22.

Finally, this concept of Services of the Word has the potential to respond to the needs of young Catholics in Europe, enabling their growth in liturgical literacy and, moreover, encouraging them to become increasingly responsible for the communities of which they are members. It opens space for their contribution e.g. to liturgical design and music, acknowledging that such contribution is necessary, desired, welcomed, and will be supported. The proposal can help form a generation of young Catholics who discover faith anew through more active and conscious participation in the liturgy and who become capable of sharing this experience of faith with others (cf. 2 Tim 2:2).²²

The Challenges of the proposal

A principal challenge of this proposal is the logical necessity of acknowledging past inadequacies—perhaps even failures—in liturgical catechesis. Consequently, the proposal exposes insufficient and unevaluated catechesis from earlier periods, an uncomfortable revelation for bishops and pastoral workers. Those in leadership positions may have to confront a bitter reality that is difficult to accept, given the multitude of already existing crises and challenges. Nevertheless, there is no reason to assume that, unlike other areas of Church life, liturgical formation has been free of inadequacies or mistakes. In order to move forward, a realistic assessment of the status quo is inevitable and must not be avoided. Although Rainer Bucher and Michael Schüßler originally made this observation in relation to modern theological challenges, it applies equally to the current state of *liturgical literacy* among the faithful in Europe and to the extent to which *liturgical illiteracy* stems from the shortcomings of those responsible: “There is no direct path from the Church’s past to its future that bypasses the disastrous present.”²³ Courage in confronting this reality, together with a willingness to change and address contemporary challenges, are prerequisites for anyone seeking to open the way toward genuine liturgical literacy.

Outlook

In the sub-paragraph concerning a single ESW in the monthly cycle, an academic study that would enable the identification of core liturgical competencies requiring deepening in the local community was mentioned. In this suggestion we refer to the task of academic theology, which must keep in mind its genuinely pastoral orientation and its concern for the relationship to pastoral reality, as stressed by the Second Vatican Council and reiterated in *Veritatis Gaudium*, 2. We mean a scientific analysis that could examine the question of liturgical competencies of the faithful at the diocesan level and identify those competencies that urgently demand deepening and development. A diocese is appropriate here because it usually has, at its disposal, the resources needed to carry out such a study (using its own academic staff or outsourcing the conduct). Consequently, the study could

²² Thus, constituting an example of liturgical step towards “genuine missionary conversion” *Ibid.*, 26.

²³ Bucher and Schüßler, “Der Flow,” 162. Translation mine.

consist of a quantitative component that seeks to answer the following questions: what is currently happening in diocese XYZ in terms of liturgical catechesis and mystagogy? Which liturgical competencies are missing in the diocese? Where are participants' weak points? My concluding recommendation is of the necessity to contextualize and differentiate the results across regions and individual communities in order to design Services of the Word adjusted to local needs. To achieve this, a diocesan-level questionnaire template could be developed and subsequently used for fieldwork in each community, thus gathering a comprehensive picture of the status quo and needs. The results could become the starting point for a (diocesan) roadmap for developing prioritized competency goals, followed by a management plan—for example, a detailed two-year catechetical strategy with defined resources, milestones, and timeline. Such an approach would ensure a precise, contextualized, and verifiable strategy for developing liturgical literacy among the faithful and would allow the harnessing of the formative potential of the liturgy itself.

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CODING THE KINGDOM: AI AND THE FUTURE OF FAITH FOR YOUNG ADULTS

Natalie Strumble

Abstract

Christianity in Europe stands amid epochal transformation, marked by declining institutional participation, shifting cultural horizons, and the disruptive emergence of digital technologies. For young Catholics in Dublin, a city where religious heritage and secular innovation intersect, the challenge of interpreting these “signs of the times” (*Gaudium et Spes* 4) demands new methods of theological reflection. Artificial Intelligence (AI), as both a cultural phenomenon and a practical tool, offers a distinctive medium through which young adults can engage the Christian tradition in creative and critical ways.

This paper explores the transformative potential of AI in shaping the future of faith among young adults. It underscores the profound cultural and theological challenges that AI presents, including inherent biases and reinforcing narrow ideological perspectives. Recognising the digital environment as a new frontier for theological engagement, this paper advocates for a human-centred approach that employs AI as a tool for dialogue, tradition, and the renewal of Catholic faith. It highlights the importance of critical discernment in leveraging AI systems to facilitate access to theological sources and foster authentic spiritual encounters. This paper revisits foundational theological concepts such as the *imago Dei*, freedom and creativity, through the lens of AI, drawing on the philosophical insights of Saint Augustine to distinguish between knowledge and wisdom. It argues that AI can serve as a reflective mirror of human hopes and fears, providing an opportunity for the Church to articulate perennial truths in digital vernaculars.

This paper concludes with a case study on the use of AI among young adults in Dublin, revealing both apprehensions and potential for AI in faith formation. Ultimately, this paper affirms that when guided by human discernment and ethical principles, AI can be a conduit for divine truth and a catalyst for faith that is rooted in community and incarnational presence in the digital age.

Introduction

Christianity in Europe, particularly within vibrant, once historically Catholic contexts like Dublin, is undergoing an “epochal transformation”¹ marked by declining institutional participation and the disruptive emergence of digital technologies.² Navigating this intersection of religious heritage and secular innovation demands new modes of theological engagement.³ Following the guidance of the Second Vatican Council, the Church has the essential duty to scrutinize the “signs of the times” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 4) and interpret them in the light of the Gospel using language intelligible to each generation. Today, interpreting these signs requires a profound theological engagement with Artificial Intelligence (AI), a technology radically transforming society, culture, and individual self-understanding.⁴

AI presents faith communities with unprecedented challenges within the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.⁵ However, it is crucial to acknowledge that AI systems are inherently shaped by their training data, as the quality and nature of their outputs depend entirely on the datasets they process.⁶ This means that AI responses often reflect specific cultural and theological perspectives, frequently inheriting the biases, worldviews, and even the systemic racism or narrow ideological slants present in the human-generated texts they digest.⁷ Such biases significantly influence how faith and human identity are presented, often leading AI to simplify complex religious issues or adopt an “axiologically focused” approach that may privilege Western or Judeo-Christian frameworks over other traditions.⁸ Recognising this bias is essential for ensuring that technology serves as a tool that works alongside genuine dialogue and human development. Without critical human oversight and clear ethical guardrails, AI risks reproducing limited worldview assumptions and reinforcing a “dominant culture’s advantage” rather than fostering an authentic culture of encounter.⁹

While many traditional Church programs are often perceived as insufficient to address young adults’ concerns, AI offers a distinct medium for theological reflection. This technology moves beyond being categorised merely as an object of ethical scrutiny to become an active instrument of exploration.¹⁰ Pope Francis has

¹ Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness Father Francis at the G7 in Borgo Egnazia (Puglia).”

² Anyanwu, “Towards a Human-Centered Innovation in Digital Technologies and Artificial Intelligence.”

³ Oliver, “The Bible in the Fourth Industrial Revolution: ‘What’s in It for Me?’”

⁴ Brittain, “Artificial Intelligence: Three Challenges to Theology.”

⁵ Alkhouri, “Spiritual Confusion in the Era of Artificial Intelligence.”

⁶ Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness Father Francis at the G7 in Borgo Egnazia (Puglia).”

⁷ Reed, “The Theology of GPT-2: Religion and Artificial Intelligence.”

⁸ Tsuria and Tsuria, “Artificial Intelligence’s Understanding of Religion.”

⁹ Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness Father Francis at the G7 in Borgo Egnazia (Puglia).”

¹⁰ Alkhouri, “Spiritual Confusion in the Era of Artificial Intelligence.”

noted that technology reflects both the creative freedom given by God and human fragility.¹¹ Theology's core task is to guide the use of AI toward deepening communion rather than fragmenting human meaning.¹²

The Vatican and scholars, particularly in the recently published *Antiqua et Nova*, advocate for a human-centred approach, recognising technology as a brilliant product of human creative potential intended to serve humanity and the common good.¹³ This paper argues that AI can function as an active medium for renewing Catholic faith, focusing on two pivotal areas: first, the deployment of AI as a theological instrument for dialogue and tradition; and second, the critical re-evaluation of human identity (*imago Dei*), freedom, and creativity in theological perspective prompted by machine intelligence. Young Catholics, positioned as digital natives, are uniquely vital to leading this necessary adaptation.¹⁴ This paper will conclude with a short case study on the initial uses of artificial intelligence among young adults in the Archdiocese of Dublin for faith exploration.

Being Young, Being European, Being Catholic

To speak of young adults in Europe is to speak of plurality. Many are post-institutional in practice yet spiritually searching in orientation. Charles Taylor's account of the "immanent frame" helps explain this condition: even within secular horizons, the longing for transcendence persists.¹⁵ For young Catholics, and those I encounter in Dublin, faith is often less an inherited identity than an existential choice, one made within a culture of scepticism but also of creativity.

Europe's young Catholics inhabit multiple worlds simultaneously: digital, cultural, ethical, and sacramental.¹⁶ They are fluent in technologies of connection, yet often distant from the Church's institutional forms.¹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI described the internet as a "digital continent", a new missionary field requiring presence rather than withdrawal.¹⁸ The challenge is therefore pastoral as much as theological: how can the Church accompany young adults whose lives are mediated by algorithms? The answer cannot simply be to condemn or retreat. Instead, the Church must enter digital culture as the Word entered the world: humbly, incarnationally, and dialogically.

¹¹ Pope Francis, "Address of His Holiness Father Francis at the G7 in Borgo Egnazia (Puglia)."

¹² Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Dicastery for Culture and Education, *Antiqua et Nova: Note on the Relationship Between Artificial Intelligence and Human Intelligence*.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Oliver, "The Bible in the Fourth Industrial Revolution."

¹⁵ Rixon, "Artificial Intelligence as a Theological Challenge."

¹⁶ Anyanwu, "Towards a Human-Centered Innovation in Digital Technologies and Artificial Intelligence."

¹⁷ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and the Entire People of God*.

¹⁸ Adrián Ruiz, "New Evangelization, New Technologies."

Tradition as a Living Process: *Dei Verbum* and Digital Hermeneutics

Dei Verbum 8 teaches that tradition is a living reality in which “the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth.”¹⁹ Tradition is not a museum of doctrines but a dynamic process of reception, guided by the Holy Spirit through history.²⁰ This theological anthropology of growth allows for dialogue between faith and technology.²¹

In the age of AI, theological tradition can be reinterpreted through what might be called *digital hermeneutics*.²² Just as the printing press expanded access to scripture, or radio amplified the Church’s voice, AI now mediates theological knowledge and spiritual experience.²³ AI-enabled systems can facilitate fresh engagement with the sources of faith.²⁴ Intelligent search algorithms and conversational models can assist young Catholics in exploring scripture, Church documents, and theological reflection in relational ways.²⁵ As previously mentioned, AI systems are shaped by their training data, reflecting specific cultural and theological perspectives. Therefore, critical human discernment remains essential to contextualise and evaluate AI-generated reflections. When guided by human discernment, such technologies can make the *depositum fidei* more accessible, echoing Pope Francis’ call for a “Church that listens and accompanies” (*Christus Vivit* 38).

Yet the digital cannot replace the incarnate. AI may support learning, but it cannot perform the relational task of witnessing. The Spirit who animates tradition is personal, not programmable.

AI as a Theological Instrument and Medium for Reflection

The argument that AI can function as an active instrument of theological exploration is supported by its potential to enhance religious education, facilitate dialogue with tradition, and model emerging ethical questions.²⁶ Viewing AI as a medium, rather than simply an ethical dilemma, enables the Church to harness its computational power to articulate perennial truths in new digital vernaculars.

This potential of new digital vernaculars, aligns with the broader goal of democratising theology, making profound concepts understandable and transparent to

¹⁹ *Dei Verbum*.

²⁰ *Ibid*.

²¹ Slattery and Green, “Encountering Artificial Intelligence in the Catholic Tradition.”

²² *Ibid*.

²³ *Ibid*.

²⁴ Sihombing, “Artificial Intelligence and Christian Religious Education Management.”

²⁵ Tsuria and Tsuria, “Artificial Intelligence’s Understanding of Religion.”

²⁶ Sihombing, “Artificial Intelligence and Christian Religious Education Management.”

congregants and the wider public.²⁷ Furthermore, AI can help young adults engage with a multitude of topics from the Church's past and heritage, up to the *Memoria Passionis* (Memory of the Passion) through curated digital resources. This digital dialogue functions as an aid to *anamnesis*, recalling the Church's living memory.

Practical Applications and Strategic Negotiation

In practice, AI is already being used in ecclesial settings. In casual conversations, clergy have stated they utilise AI for homily preparation, content generation, and answering theological questions. The use of AI has grown to the extent that in February 2026, Pope Leo XIV addressed clergy from the Diocese of Rome where he warned against "the temptation to prepare homilies with Artificial Intelligence".²⁸ AI chatbots demonstrate a good understanding of different religious languages and worldviews, capable of producing texts, such as prayers, that follow diverse traditions.²⁹ Within Christian Religious Education (CRE), AI can enhance management, personalise learning, and automate administrative burdens, thereby enabling educators to focus more on spiritual guidance and direct human interaction.³⁰ Religious leaders are strategically negotiating AI use to align with core values, prioritising community solidarity and human dignity.³¹ This negotiation ensures AI serves as a complementary tool rather than a replacement for essential human-to-human relationality.³²

AI and Human Identity in Theological Perspective

The advent of AI compels a profound interrogation of fundamental Catholic concepts surrounding the human person, the *imago Dei*, freedom, and creativity.³³ Theological accounts of the *imago Dei* (being created "in the image of God") have historically focused on reason or function (dominion) but have shifted to emphasise being in relationship.³⁴ When machines simulate understanding, there is a risk of succumbing to a functionalist perspective, valuing people solely based on the work they perform, rather than their inherent dignity.

AI functions as a cultural mirror. Beth Singler on her work on AI image creation has argued that artificial intelligence operates as a mirror for human hopes and fears, embodying our theological and mythological projections about what it

²⁷ Oliver, "The Bible in the Fourth Industrial Revolution."

²⁸ Salvatore Cernuzio, "Pope in Dialogue with Rome's Priests."

²⁹ Tsuria and Tsuria, "Artificial Intelligence's Understanding of Religion."

³⁰ Sihombing, "Artificial Intelligence and Christian Religious Education Management."

³¹ Cheong and Liu, "Faithful Innovation: Negotiating Institutional Logics for AI Value Alignment Among Christian Churches in America."

³² Cheong and Liu, "Faithful Innovation."

³³ Brittain, "Artificial Intelligence."

³⁴ Ibid.

means to create and to be created.³⁵ In her anthropological work, Singler observes that the metaphors surrounding AI often echo religious language: salvation, omniscience, even incarnation.³⁶ Singler argues that if we look at AI with the “gaze of an outsider,” we see continuities of mythologising and enchantment even in a self-proclaimed secular age.³⁷ Within Catholic thought, this cultural mirror can be turned to spiritual purpose to view AI functions not as a rival but as a supportive tool for human flourishing and the advancement of the common good.³⁸ Rather than viewing AI as a threatening competitor, theologians could potentially interpret it as a domain where God-given creative potential and human ingenuity converge to “perfecting the visible creation”.³⁹

Antiqua et Nova speaks of the need to renew ancient faith through new forms of expression. This is precisely the opportunity AI presents: to articulate perennial truths in new digital vernaculars. However, *Antiqua et Nova* does bring to prominence the key areas of concern that need to be kept to the fore.

Algor-ethics and Modelling Ethical Challenges

A vital function of AI as a theological instrument lies in its capacity to model complex emerging ethical issues within the framework of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). Pope Francis insists that the “intrinsic dignity of every man and every woman” must be the “key criterion” for evaluating new technologies.⁴⁰ The resulting ethical reflection on the use of algorithms, termed “algor-ethics”, must guide AI development to ensure technologies serve humanity and the common good.⁴¹

Antiqua et Nova stresses that AI applications must address emerging questions related to critical areas of social concern:

1. Social Inequality and Labour: AI, particularly through automation, risks displacing labourers and increasing global wealth disparity. Christian concepts like the love of neighbour and the common good must monitor the equitable distribution of AI’s benefits, stressing that work is a human good.
2. Ecological Justice: AI holds hope for modelling complex global environmental issues. Catholic Social Teaching encourages “integral ecology,” affirming that care for the Earth is intrinsically linked to human dignity.

³⁵ Singler, “The AI Creation Meme: A Case Study of the New Visibility of Religion in Artificial Intelligence Discourse.”

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Green et al., “Artificial Intelligence and Moral Theology: A Conversation.”

³⁹ *Antiqua et Nova*, 37

⁴⁰ Ibid., 42.

⁴¹ Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness Father Francis at the G7 in Borgo Egnazia (Puglia).”

3. Human Dignity and Agency: The Church maintains that full moral causality belongs only to personal agents. AI must support the “total vocation of the human person,” requiring systems to be trustworthy, secure, and transparent to protect individual rights and accountability.

Augustine and AI

Building upon the recognition of these complex ethical **enquiries**, it becomes essential to contemplate the foundational distinctions between types of knowledge and wisdom. The theological perspectives of Saint Augustine offer an especially pertinent framework for this discussion. He draws a rigorous distinction between *scientia*, defined as the “rational *cognitio* of temporal things,” and *sapientia*, understood as the “intellectual *cognitio* of eternal things.”⁴² Whilst artificial intelligence demonstrates proficiency in *scientia* through its capacity for processing information and performing algorithms, it fundamentally lacks *sapientia*, which Augustine identifies with the “love of wisdom” and the attainment of the “*beata vita*,” or happy life.⁴³ While knowledge arises through the reasoning power of the mind and intellectual enquiry regarding the sensory world, this higher wisdom requires a rational soul capable of contemplating undeniable truths and the divine order, a spiritual process that transcends mere computational functions.⁴⁴

This epistemological framework has significant implications for how technologies such as artificial intelligence might be interpreted. AI systems operate almost exclusively within the realm of *scientia* because they are designed to process data, generate predictions, and facilitate practical problem-solving within the temporal sphere.⁴⁵ Such systems may enhance the human capacity for analytical reasoning and information management, yet they cannot participate in *sapientia*. Wisdom, in the Augustinian view, necessitates the contemplation of eternal truths and an alignment with the highest good.⁴⁶ This process requires a rational soul that is intimately present to itself and oriented toward God, a spiritual subjectivity that transcends mere mechanical or computational processes.⁴⁷

Consequently, AI may be interpreted as a tool that extends human *scientia* without substituting for the human pursuit of *sapientia*. Much like other technological instruments, it can support practical knowledge and action by improving research and productivity, yet it lacks the capacity to determine the ultimate ends of such

⁴² Siebert, “Augustine’s Development on Testimonial Knowledge.”

⁴³ Ofilada Mina, “*Religatio* as Shift from *Scientia* to *Sapientia*.”

⁴⁴ Siebert, “Augustine’s Development on Testimonial Knowledge.”

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Mina, “*Religatio* as Shift from *Scientia* to *Sapientia*.”

⁴⁷ Stróżyński, “There Is No Searching for the Self.”

knowledge. Those ends remain within the domain of wisdom and moral discernment, which is a metaphysical process proceeding from the depths of human being. From this perspective, it could be suggested the ethical application of AI relies on human agents who can integrate technical *scientia* with contemplative *sapientia*. In Augustinian terms, technology belongs to the sphere of temporal knowledge, whereas the responsibility to orient that knowledge toward the good remains grounded in the pursuit of wisdom.⁴⁸

Necessary Limitations

While AI serves as a powerful medium, its current utility is not without limitations. Its epistemological approach often tends to simplify complex religious issues and frequently neglects religious texts as primary sources.⁴⁹ The theological category of freedom and decision-making is directly challenged by intelligent systems.⁵⁰ Successful theological engagement requires human discernment and critical reasoning to evaluate AI-generated content. Furthermore, the digital cannot replace the incarnate.⁵¹ AI struggles to evaluate the subjective and qualitative dimensions of spirituality, such as faith development or engagement with prayer, because the Spirit who animates tradition is personal, not programmable. The process of integrating technology into spiritual education demands continuous monitoring, ethical guidelines, and stakeholder involvement to maintain the necessary balance between technology and spiritual values.⁵²

Creativity, Embodiment, and Sacramentality

AI also demands a re-evaluation of creativity. Science and technology are recognised as brilliant products of the creative potential God bestowed upon human beings.⁵³ However, concerns arise that AI might take over creativity, transforming a personal idea into “AI’s idea”.⁵⁴ Although AI can generate artwork by applying data creatively, it fundamentally operates by processing existing, known data.⁵⁵ The gap remains between AI’s reliance on computational reckoning and the creative figuring of intentional judgment, the unique human capacity for metaphor and symbolic insight.⁵⁶ The pastoral task, particularly with young Catholics, involves affirming human co-creativity as participation in divine artistry while guarding against the reduction of the person to data. This is one of the key messages of *Antiqua et Nova*.

⁴⁸ Mina, “*Religatio* as Shift from *Scientia* to *Sapientia*.”

⁴⁹ Tsuria and Tsuria, “Artificial Intelligence’s Understanding of Religion.”

⁵⁰ Cormie, “Artificial Intelligence: Challenges and Possibilities for Theology and Ethics.”

⁵¹ See for example: *Antiqua et Nova*.

⁵² Sihombing, “Artificial Intelligence and Christian Religious Education Management.”

⁵³ Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness Father Francis at the G7 in Borgo Egnazia (Puglia).”

⁵⁴ Ombudsman for Children, “Policy Spotlight on AI: A Children’s Rights Review.”

⁵⁵ Bentley, “Being Human and the Emergence of Artificial Intelligence Technology.”

⁵⁶ Rixon, “Artificial Intelligence as a Theological Challenge.”

Furthermore, the Catholic faith is highly embodied, relying on physical actions like kneeling, consuming, and embracing (sacraments). The use of intelligent systems in spiritual inquiry raises pressing questions about the algorithmic mediation of spiritual practices. *Sacramentum Caritatis* 9 affirms that sacramental presence is relational and incarnate; Christ becomes present through embodied signs that mediate grace rather than merely signify it.⁵⁷ While AI can extend communication, it cannot substitute for communion. When a theological chatbot was asked to hear confession, it explicitly stated its lack of authorisation to perform the sacrament, highlighting the necessary boundaries related to spiritual authority and genuine religious experience.⁵⁸ Technology must be viewed as a supportive tool, not a replacement for essential human interaction, ensuring that AI promotes genuine human development and fraternity rather than reinforcing the dangerous “technocratic paradigm”.⁵⁹

Case Study

This point came through strongly in a recent, small scale case study, that was conducted among young adults in the Archdiocese of Dublin. This is a precursor to a larger study that will form part of my doctoral thesis. In August 2025, a group of 10 young adults travelled to Rome for the “Jubilee of Youth” as ambassadors for the archdiocese. During the time in Rome, conversations began about artificial intelligence and the role it played in their daily lives. It then moved on to a discussion on its role as a tool of faith exploration and the question of accuracy and reliability of information. It was said that further exploration was needed. In preparation for this paper, the members of the group were invited to take part in a short case study to begin exploring and discerning future possible research studies to address the concerns of accuracy and reliability of information. All 10 who travelled to Rome as Ambassadors for the Archdiocese of Dublin were approached. In the short window of time, 11 participants took part: 8 (of the initial group of 10) had the time to take part, 2 were away, and 3 others were invited to take part (siblings of the initial group of 10).

The exploratory study was in 3 parts:

1. General questions on their current uses and knowledge of Artificial Intelligence;
2. A comparison of question and answers from *YouCat* (Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church) & a chosen GenAI platform;
3. Review questions and final comments.

Of the 11 participants, the age range was 18-35 years. Out of the group, 2 participants were 18-21 years, 3 participants were 22-25 years, 5 participants were 26-

⁵⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*.

⁵⁸ McGrath, “ChatGPT and Biblical Studies.”

⁵⁹ Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness Father Francis at the G7 in Borgo Egnazia (Puglia).”

30, and 1 participant was 31-35 years. Out of the group of 11, 10 participants currently use some form of AI in their daily lives. They were asked of the current areas they used AI platforms and what platforms did they use. The answers can be seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2. In these questions, participants could select one or more answers:

Current uses of Artificial Intelligence	Participants
General searches e.g. using it as a search engine	8 participants
College work e.g. essay support, general learning	3 participants
Work help e.g. writing emails, letters	11 participants
Personal plans e.g. exercise, food plans	4 participants
Faith Exploration	4 participants
Other	1 participant

Figure 1: Current uses of Artificial Intelligence

Current GenAI platform used	Participants
ChatGPT	11 participants
CoPilot	3 participants
Gemini	1 participant
Jasper	0 participants
Claude	0 participants
MagisteriumAI	1 participant
Other	1 participant

Figure 2: GenAI platforms used

A mixture of AI platforms was used, with all 11 using ChatGPT. The participants were asked about their general knowledge of AI on 4 categories: basic knowledge, skillset, understanding, and integration into daily life. The majority of the group sat within the above average or average scale on all four categories as outlined in Figure 3.

	Exceptional	Above Average	Average	Below Average	Poor
Basic Knowledge of AI	1	4	5	1	-
Skillset to use AI	-	4	7	-	-
Understanding of AI	-	3	6	1	1
Integration into daily life	1	2	6	1	1

Figure 3: Rating of skillset to use Artificial Intelligence

In the initial asking of “how likely would you be to integrate Artificial Intelligence as a tool for faith formation?” the following answers were selected: ‘Very Likely’ – 2 participants; “Somewhat likely” – 4 participants; “Neither likely nor unlikely” – 4 participants; “Somewhat unlikely” – 1 participant; “Very unlikely”

– 0 participants. Some answers were given for the above reasoning, ranging from “greater access to information” and “everything I do is online-based”, with “unsure of the reliability of information coming in top”.

Participants were asked to select a platform of choice to input the designated questions. All 11 participants selected ChatGPT as their chosen platform.

The next stage was to answer 5 questions from Section 4 of *YouCat* on the topic prayer.⁶⁰ All were asked to input the question into their AI platform, and copy and paste their AI answers into a text box. This allowed a study of information provided from the chosen AI platform. Participants were then asked to read the provided answer from *YouCat*, compare the two answers to the questions, and then rate the answer provided by their Gen AI platform under 4 categories. Finally, they were asked to select the preferred answer: *YouCat*, AI platform, both, or neither.

The 5 questions chosen from *YouCat* were:

1. What is prayer? *YouCat* 469 (p. 258)
2. Can you learn to pray from the Bible? *YouCat* 491 (p. 270)
3. What are the characteristics of Christian prayer? *YouCat* 493 (p. 271)
4. What does it mean to learn from Jesus how to pray? *YouCat* 477 (p. 262)
5. Why do we need the Holy Spirit when we pray? *YouCat* 496 (p. 272)

It was noted that when questions were broad or general, the rating of the AI answer was weighted on the scale in “agree” or “neutral”. In terms of the question of “which answer do you prefer?”, in broad questions, such as “what is prayer?” (*Figure 5*), 9 participants selected *YouCat*, 1 selected both, and 1 selected neither. When questions were more precise, “what are the characteristics of Christian prayer?” the responses took a more varied approach. The majority of the answers to the 4 evaluation categories fell in “strongly agree” or “agree”, with less than a third falling into an “average” and “strong disagree” rating. In terms of “which answer do you prefer?”, for this question, 2 said *YouCat*, 3 said AI platform, and 6 said both. The answers are outlined in *Figures 4 – 13*.

⁶⁰ Miller, *Youcat*: English: Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Response was:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<i>Reliable and factually accurate</i>	-	5	5	1	-
<i>Clear, well-structured, and easy to read</i>	3	4	3	-	1
<i>Useful and relevant</i>	-	3	3	5	-
<i>Satisfied with the quality of the response</i>	-	4	3	4	-

Figure 4: Question 1 Rating: What is prayer?

Preference of Answer	Participants
<i>YouCat</i>	9 participants
<i>AI platform</i>	0 participants
<i>Both</i>	1 participant
<i>Neither</i>	1 participant

Figure 5: Question 1 Preference of Answer

Response was:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<i>Reliable and factually accurate</i>	1	6	3	1	-
<i>Clear, well-structured, and easy to read</i>	3	6	1	1	-
<i>Useful and relevant</i>	1	5	4	-	1
<i>Satisfied with the quality of the response</i>	2	4	4	1	-

Figure 6: Question 2 Rating: Can you learn to pray from the Bible?

Preference of Answer	Participants
<i>YouCat</i>	4 participants
<i>AI platform</i>	3 participants
<i>Both</i>	4 participants
<i>Neither</i>	0 participants

Figure 7: Question 2 Preference of Answer

Response was:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<i>Reliable and factually accurate</i>	2	6	2	-	1
<i>Clear, well-structured, and easy to read</i>	2	7	1	-	1
<i>Useful and relevant</i>	2	7	-	1	1
<i>Satisfied with the quality of the response</i>	2	6	2	-	1

Figure 8: Question 3 Rating: What are the characteristics of Christian prayer?

Preference of Answer	Participants
<i>YouCat</i>	2 participants
AI platform	3 participants
Both	6 participants
Neither	0 participants

Figure 9: Question 3 Preference of Answer

Response was:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<i>Reliable and factually accurate</i>	3	3	4	-	1
<i>Clear, well-structured, and easy to read</i>	4	3	3	-	1
<i>Useful and relevant</i>	4	3	3	-	1
<i>Satisfied with the quality of the response</i>	4	4	2	-	1

Figure 10: Question 4 Rating: What does it mean to learn from Jesus how to pray?

Preference of Answer	Participants
<i>YouCat</i>	4 participants
AI platform	2 participants

Both	5 participants
Neither	0 participants

Figure 11: Question 4 Preference of Answer

Response was:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Reliable and factually accurate	3	6	2	-	-
Clear, well-structured, and easy to read	4	6	-	1	-
Useful and relevant	3	5	2	1	-
Satisfied with the quality of the response	4	6	-	1	-

Figure 12: Question 5 Rating: Why do we need the Holy Spirit when we pray?

Preference of Answer	Participants
YouCat	3 participants
AI platform	4 participants
Both	4 participants
Neither	0 participants

Figure 13: Question 5 Preference of Answer

In the closing questions of “how useful did you find the platform?”, 3 participants said “very useful” and 6 participants said “somewhat useful”, with 1 participant stating “not useful” and 1 participant providing an “other” answer. In relation to accuracy of answers, 8 participants rated the answers provided “above average”, with 1 participant saying “excellent”, 1 participant saying “average”, and 1 participant saying “below average”. When asked again, “how likely would you be to integrate Artificial Intelligence as a tool for faith formation?” The answers rose from the initial answers provided. They now were:

Potential future use of Artificial Intelligence for faith formation	Participants
Very likely	4 participants
Somewhat likely	4 participants
Neither likely nor unlikely	2 participants
Somewhat unlikely	1 participant
Very unlikely	0 participants

Figure 14: Potential future use of Artificial Intelligence for faith formation

In the last question, participants were given the opportunity to expand on any answers given and/or share some final thoughts. The main points of the answers provided are summarised below:

- AI can be a “powerful tool for spreading religion and encouraging spirituality”, especially among young people, but it should be “used carefully alongside reliable sources”.
- Personal experiences show that online platforms (including AI and social media) can help people rediscover faith during difficult times
- Despite the benefits of technology, the need for “in-person encounter” cannot be undermined and is still seen as very strong and deemed necessary.
- The quality of AI responses depends heavily on how questions are asked: clearer, more precise prompts improve usefulness.
- ChatGPT tends to give longer, more detailed, step-by-step answers, which can be helpful for beginners but sometimes feel overly lengthy or text-heavy.
- *YouCat* is generally “more concise”, scripture-focused, and offers deeper biblical, philosophical, and poetic insight.
- AI platforms are praised for structure, clarity, and guidance, while *YouCat* excels in theological depth and references to scripture and saints.
- AI responses can feel personalised based on prior input, but they are seen as a supplement, not a replacement, for traditional faith-learning materials.
- Overall, AI is helpful for guidance and exploration, while *YouCat* is valued for depth, brevity, and theological authority.

Limitations of the Study

YouCat was selected because it is widely recognised by young adults as a reliable catechetical resource that supports exploration of the Catholic faith. However, it is important to briefly mention the limitations of *YouCat*. A significant constraint of the *YouCat* involves its simple and foundational methodology. Designed specifically for youth, the work employs a concise question and answer structure which favours ease of access over extensive theological rigour. Subsequently, many complex dogmatic questions are addressed only in a cursory manner, potentially leaving significant nuances unexamined and necessitating further exploration to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for a full explanation. Furthermore, because the text utilises contemporary vernacular, visual aids, and diverse citations to appeal to a modern audience, *YouCat* risks the oversimplification of core beliefs or the omission of essential historical and doctrinal frameworks, which may fail to provide the authentic reflection required for mature development. While *YouCat* is esteemed as an approachable entry point to Catholic dogma, it is ultimately more effective as a pedagogical threshold than as an exhaustive theological authority.

There are limitations to the practicalities of the case study. The limitations include: its small sample size; the group had limited demographic diversity; it was carried out over a short time so it does not provide long-term insights; participants' responses could have been influenced by social desirability or personal perceptions, which might not reflect the full role AI plays in their spiritual lives; and additionally, without a control group or baseline data, it's difficult to determine the true impact of AI on faith exploration. However, this initial case study is a precursor to a larger study that will form part of my doctoral thesis, and these limitations will be addressed.

Summary of Initial Study Findings

While a very small, discerning case study, initial findings have shown that AI is being used in the everyday life of young Catholics in Dublin for a variety of reasons. There is initial trepidation on its inclusion in faith exploration, mostly from a reliability of information aspect. However, once comparison is shown, the confidence to include AI platforms into faith exploration grows, potentially indicating its likelihood of inclusion. This is a topic to be explored in greater depth to gauge on a larger scale the current uses of AI in faith, sources, reliability, and how a hybridity of the online and in-person can co-exist. This hybridity stems from the final comments of the participants summarised above, where reference was made to the continuing need for in-person encounter. While a small sample of participants, the prevalence of AI in their daily lives (for work, study, personal plan support) would indicate that over time, AI will form part of the ways of being a young Catholic in Dublin today. This has greater implications for current work with young adults in the Archdiocese of Dublin and the universal Church on how we pastorally support young Catholics in their faith journey today and in the future.

Conclusion

AI is more than a tool to be scrutinised; it is a powerful medium that, when guided by prudent human intelligence, can actively assist in retrieving the depth of tradition and modelling the complexity of emerging ethical challenges. AI will not determine the future of faith, but it will shape the conditions in which faith is lived. For young adults in the Archdiocese of Dublin, it offers both challenge and opportunity: to rediscover the Church not as relic but as networked communion, alive with creative possibility. *Dei Verbum* teaches that God's Word continues to dwell among us. Today, that Word may echo through the hum of servers and the syntax of code, if believers are willing to listen. AI, approached with humility and discernment, can become a contemporary parable of incarnation as a means by which divine truth is spoken in new languages. As Pope Francis exhorts: "Do not be afraid to go and bring Christ into every area of life, to the fringes of society,

even to those who seem farthest away and most indifferent.”⁶¹ To code the Kingdom is to participate in God’s ongoing creation to build, to question, and to hope as disciples in a digital age.

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PART II: YOUNG CATHOLICS IN EUROPE BETWEEN IDENTITY AND IDENTITARIANISM

CHRISTIANITY AND YOUTHFULNESS: INTERROGATING THE PRESENT AWARENESS

Gabriel Ewodo Evina Messomo

Abstract

The bimillennial history of Christianity is susceptible of showing signs of exhaustion. These signs, once they are perceived, create in the awareness of the young generations an image of a boring Church. Attempts to reconcile Christianity with the youth, in Europe in particular, often end up with a kind of obsession on the Church's side and a repulsion from young people. Behind these sociological facts, there is a latent reductionism that consists in the conception of an age-based Christianity. This conception undermines the vitality that Christianity still has, despite its age-old history; more erroneously, it opposes what is alive and dynamic to faith and Tradition, when the latter is handed over to the so-called conservative views. This contribution, however, does not aim at reflecting on Christian Tradition, but drawing from its resource (Scriptures and early Christian writings), it creates a space for dialogue with Christians, and especially with young people, about Christianity and Youthfulness. In this dialogue, it is more important to raise meaningful questions than to provide hermetic answers. A central question would be: in what sense is youthfulness an intrinsic attribute of Christianity? This implies, among other things, a specific approach in the mission of the Church today, that is, to consider the attention to young people not as a desperate search for fresh energy, but rather as an expression of an authentic Christian life. In every age – nowadays even more – the awareness of the youthfulness “inherent” in our being Christian is indispensable; this awareness depends, in the final analysis, on the place given to the living trinitarian mystery in Christian existence.

“Christian” and “youth” is a rather harsh and not very credible word combination. The issue is not “modern” or “old fashioned,” but rather solely our thinking concerning and from the perspective of the church.

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Eight Theses on Youth Work”

Preliminary considerations

Young Catholic Europeans who are invited to reflect on the future of Christianity in Europe, would deal forthrightly with issues that matter for this cause. This is rightly so, for they are clearly involved from a cultural background; they already have, as the Italian idiom puts it, *le mani in pasta*. However, a non-European voice – though a young Catholic – would concretise, I believe, what the French

philosopher François Jullien calls “*écart*,”¹ thus permitting a shift from “identity” to “resource” and “fecundity.” From this standpoint, this voice would be able to explore at least two uncommon paths: the first is the problematisation of ideas that might likely be taken for granted in some reflections that aim at offering a constructive contribution to the future of Christianity (specifically in Europe); the second is the enunciation of legitimate observations that would be shared – it is presumed – by many (in Europe and beyond), and that constitute what can be seen as the awareness of our present time.

The words of the 20th century German Lutheran pastor and theologian, Bonhoeffer, stated in our epigraph, seem to contradict the same combination chosen in the title: Christianity and Youthfulness. But, as it shall be demonstrated, we are rather given some guidelines on how to carry out research of this nature. If we agree with Bonhoeffer’s idea – we could disagree as well – that the issue is not “modern” or “old fashioned,” then, before getting to the main concern, it should be understood why some people would see something as “modern” while other people would see it as “old fashioned,” and from there, take a step ahead, towards a more convincing perspective. What can be observed, at the social level, is that the emphasis laid upon generational change in the first quarter of the third millennium, has made the youth phase a central issue worldwide. In various religious contexts, attention is paid to the inclusion and the formation of youth. Nevertheless, this does not yet mean that youthfulness has effectively been problematised. Today, however, one can hardly affirm that “being young” is not problematic,² especially when applied not merely to individuals but to a common reality such as Christianity; it appears so, even more, in a place (Europe for this case) that usually makes reference to such collective terms or age-based categories virtually in relation to the opposite idea, that is, “being old” – like is said of the “Old Continent,” or the good “Old (Catholic) Church.”

¹ Jullien, *There Is No Such Thing as Cultural Identity*, 24.

The French word “*écart*” cannot easily be translated into English. In Jullien’s sense, it is what brings forth an “in-between” or an interspace that sustains tension. The translator of the English version of Jullien’s volume prefers to use the word “divide” rather than “deviation” or any of its synonyms; yet he acknowledges that “*écart* has multiple meanings not all of which are covered by the English word *divide*” (See: Translator’s notes to pages 25 and 56).

² What is problematic about “being young” stems, at the logical level, from the different meanings one can give to this expression. We would argue that it is not a simple fact of biological age, because it can be said about inanimate realities and sometimes used in comparing different types of beings, as in the case of young people and the Church – some recent studies about this case, with indicative titles, will be mentioned in this contribution. This supposes that there lies within the second element of comparison (the Church), the specific characteristic that both elements share, that is, an age-factor. Now the (problematic) point is to clarify the perspective one chooses in this discourse.

This contribution shall follow three major steps. Given that its main purpose is to point out the most shared beliefs about Christianity and Youthfulness and to go to the root of these questions, the first step would try to highlight an awareness – still acritical – about the state of Christianity, as a question resolved from the outset. In fact, what we would call a “mis-leading” question refers to an idea that is assumed uncritically about Christianity and even considered to be central; this idea falsifies any discourse on “Christianity and youthfulness”, by limiting youthfulness to “young age.” The second step will delve into this question, to analyse the foundations of its modern expressions. The current views of youthfulness seem to be motivated by a more fundamental conception of life, of freedom and of self-realisation. From these facts, Christian churches would hardly be seen as “youthful” realities, for they do not meet the requirements of age, nor do they conform to an “authentic” life. From this, our proposal, in the final step, would be a restatement of the problem theologically, through a systematic approach: what is “being young” from the perspective of the Church? The outcome here cannot be exhaustive; *Deo favente*, it would at least contribute to rethinking the “being Christian” in Europe in particular, and in a time when “being young” appears to be a complex idea.

The (mis)leading question

Crossing the threshold of the Liverpool Anglican Cathedral and gazing over the west doors, one perceives the inscription of the contemporary artist Tracey Emin: “I Felt You And I Knew You Loved me.”³ What is striking, for the simple observer, is the form of this work and its *locus*: the artist’s own handwriting, sculpted in bright pink neon tubes that interrupt the austere continuity below. Some interesting aspects of this inscription have equally been pointed out by Ben Quash:

“This pinkness is not subtle. It brings with it a slightly wild sense – a sense of youth and flamboyance, a sense of the fairground. Its aesthetic language is at one level that of advertising, the entertainment industry, and the city... In the setting of a traditional cathedral building, its aesthetic—summed up in the pink coloring – risks a jarring tackiness, but its readiness to sail so close to the wind in this respect is the secret of its success. A different culture is introduced into the cathedral. This is disruptive but not violent; sensitive to its context even as it is disconcerting.”⁴

Now, the very fact of this disconcertment could be an expression of a series of “alleged oppositions” such as: “*eternal/slow* versus *up-to-date*, *sincere* versus

³ Tracey Emin, *For You*. Art + Christianity, <https://artandchristianity.org/>

⁴ Quash, “Can Contemporary Art Be Devotional Art?,” 71–72.

ironic/transgressive, and *auratic* versus *agoric*.”⁵ There would therefore be a normal “shock” in seeing this vivid pink colouring in a space where the sacred is more closely associated with the antique than with the contemporary. In affirming this, we have already stated a leading question on the state of Christianity: its contrast, not to say its opposition, with what is simply “up to date.” In the final analysis, what is misleading here is the age-question or the idea of age. Such idea, within the Church in Europe, may be understood at two different levels: the institutional level and the personal level.

At the institutional level

Focussing on the task of highlighting the Christian awareness in our time, I find Ghislain Lafont’s claim about the “close and reciprocal dovetailing of Christianity and Western civilization”⁶ to be largely indisputable. Very often, the borderline between both realities easily fades, and so, what is proper to Western civilization passes indistinctly to Christianity and to the Church. Lafont goes further: “And if there is reason today for ‘imagining the Church,’ isn’t this really because the forms in the Catholic Church, and perhaps in all the other churches, are too dependent on precisely what is moribund in Western civilization, the very civilization that in earlier times they helped create?”⁷

This question implicitly invites us to reflect on the (“moribund”) state of Christianity whose history is inextricably intertwined with Western civilization. The age-idea is not directly depicted here, but it cannot be avoided in a discourse whose subjects necessarily present historical and evolutionary features.⁸ This same pattern (Christianity + Civilization) can be verified when we think of the Church in a given human community, as the Church “in” Europe, “in” Asia, “in” Africa, and so forth. In this context of “particular churches,” a comparative approach is often used from a missionary perspective; this means that, those communities “recently converted to Christ” are “new” or “young churches,” while the churches of Mediterranean tradition (not only Latin, but also byzantine churches) are understood as “old churches.”⁹ With this approach, the age-question, understood in the sense of who comes first in time and who comes later between the particular churches, reduces youthfulness to what is recent or lacks a long-standing tradition. The misleading idea behind might be the confusion of youthfulness with vitality, and oldness with the absence of it; and with this, it is easily forgotten

⁵ Ibid., 74.

⁶ Lafont, *Imagining the Catholic Church*, 30.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ It is worth noting that one of the metaphors used in comparative history is the view of human species as a single individual undergoing different ages of life, from childhood and youth to adulthood and old age. In this respect, the ages of civilization correspond to those of the individual, hence the idea of the aging of a civilization, a society or an institution.

See for instance: Rossi, *Paragone degli ingegni moderni e postmoderni*, 12.

⁹ We can find this comparative approach, with regards to “particular churches,” in the Vatican II Council Decree *Ad Gentes*, *On the Mission Activity of the Church*, n°s. 10–22.

that – as we shall see in the final step – the Church as an institution, is young because it is vital, not vital because it is young. Vitality is essentially related to a “missionary spirit;” the same vital spirit with which, less than a century ago, European missionary work “achieved” African and Asian conversions.¹⁰ At this point, some questions may rightfully be asked: If European missionary work was so fruitful until relatively recently, why has Christianity in Europe suddenly begun to feel the burden of its two thousand years? Has Christianity in Europe, often perceived as aged and weary, lost its youthfulness, or it has rather lost its vitality? Is the Church in Europe condemned to be nostalgic about its youthfulness? For now, this reflection needs to consider the second level of the age-idea in the European Church.

At the personal and relational level

A Report on the extent, nature and purpose of youth work in the Church of England, entitled *Youth A Part, Young People and the Church* (published in 1996), intended – as one of the consultations found in this Report states – “to bridge the gap between young people and the structures of the Church.”¹¹ The main idea was to reconcile the youth with an “old Church,” old in its structures and in the majority of its active members. This is only an example of the constant efforts of youth ministry in all the Christian churches. The awareness here is that young people constitute “a part” of the Church, and undoubtedly a “vital” one. Nonetheless, what is understood as “structures” – either in a material or in a personal sense – remains void of this young aspect.¹² For this reason, youth ministry will try to achieve at least a *rapprochement* between two realities considered as heterogeneous. In these relentless efforts to “include” youth in structures that seem extraneous to them, we easily end up with what the American writer Andrew Root calls an “obsession with youthfulness,”¹³ thus interpreting a point already expressed by Bonhoeffer in his “Eight Theses on Youth Work:”

“Since the days of the youth movement, church youth work has often lacked that element of Christian sobriety that alone might enable it to recognize that the spirit of youth is not the Holy Spirit and that the future of the church is not youth itself but rather the Lord Jesus Christ alone. It is the task of youth not to reshape the church, but rather to listen to the Word

¹⁰ In the last article he gave – before he died in 2001 – in the Italian Review *Cristianesimo nella storia*, the British catholic theologian and Church historian Adrian Hastings spoke of “the size and vitality of the young churches by 1960;” however, “it was a size and vitality inconceivable without a huge missionary effort, both Catholic and Protestant.” Hastings, “From the End of Colonialism to the ‘Young Churches’,” 765.

¹¹ Youth A Part, 180.

¹² In fact, the aforementioned Report uses “Being Young in an Old Church” (Grove, 1986), as a bibliographical reference.

¹³ Root, *Faith formation*, introduction.

of God; it is the task of the church not to capture the youth, but to teach and proclaim the Word of God.”¹⁴

The age-question, either at the institutional or the personal level, can only mislead the Church and Christianity as a whole. Now, to give more weight to such affirmation, it is necessary to briefly look at the heart of this question and try to discover what the foundational ground of the present awareness about Christianity and youthfulness may be.

The heart of the question

It is possible to conceive a mental scheme that governs the attention to young people in most of the Christian churches throughout Europe. This scheme has at its upper and visible part, the “enthronement” of the youthful spirit, while at the bottom of the whole structure lies the “pursuit of authenticity” by a “boring church.”¹⁵ The concept of “authenticity” is borrowed from the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. In his work, *The Malaise of Modernity* (from the 1991 “Massey Lectures”), Taylor theorised for the first time the so-called “culture of authenticity.” This idea is treated extensively in a more recent work, *A Secular Age* (2007), where Taylor explains it in this way:

“[By ‘culture of authenticity’] I mean the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.”¹⁶

That we live in the age of “authenticity,” nowadays more than ever, can be proven by the numerous contemporary trends that defend and promote an idea of freedom either “from” any authoritative entity or “for” what each trend intends to be “self-realisation” – there is no doubt that the young generations are more attuned to these conceptions. In this context, every personal or institutional authority becomes a threat and definitely boring. “In the age of authenticity – Root writes – to be bored is not simply unfortunate or unpleasant; it is to be oppressed, to be violently cornered and robbed of authenticity. We as individual selves are now responsible for our own spiritual journey, so if something is boring, it is worth abandoning.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., chap. 1.

¹⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 475.

¹⁷ Root, *Faith formation*, chap. 1.

Besides, Christianity in Europe appears today in juvenile court on a charge of inauthenticity: many young people do not feel at home in a church, neither do they “find themselves” in such a place; they feel strange and like strangers when they attend a Church service or any confessional gathering; even more unfortunately, when they come across a rule or a prescription given by the Church, they react with a natural repulsion. In short, for such viewpoints, no youthfulness can be found in Christianity any longer, and all that remains of it is a boring and inauthentic structure.¹⁸ It would be a mistake to generalise such assumptions, and to think that they are true of all young Europeans or that they are undeniable. The reality is more complex than it seems, and the actual life of young Christians cannot fully be grasped by means of statistics. What is true, though, is the churches’ strong fascination with youthfulness over the past few years, so much so that many forms of evangelization moved away from the Centre: The Word of God. I can agree with Root when he writes:

“Because we’ve fused faith with youthfulness, what legitimizes faith is not experiences of divine action discerned through the wisdom of thought and practice but the excitement of disruption. [...] Under these conditions, faith that was supposed to be vibrant because it was youthful is actually attacked and torn down by the authority of youthfulness itself. To deconstruct faith becomes the ultimate act of authenticity.”¹⁹

If faith is supposed to be youthful because of its intrinsic vital (“vibrant”) nature, as Root affirms, it appears that youthfulness should remain a characteristic of a life of faith, and not separated from it, or worse still, enthroned as an autonomous entity, in such a way that being young or authentic and being a faithful Christian may be understood as two opposites.

An old and inauthentic Christianity in Europe?

This survey, so far, has presented “authenticity” as the heart of the age-question;²⁰ it can be seen as the hermeneutical horizon of the relationship between Christianity and youthfulness in our present time. Notwithstanding, if the ultimate act

¹⁸ “In the age of authenticity, youthfulness is a particularly powerful way to claim that you – or your movement or community – are vital and important. Youthfulness is not a move to honor and embrace the young themselves, seeing them as in need of mentorship and support or as those with a depth of spiritual insight. Rather, [...] youthfulness is a kind of celebrity endorsement for authenticity itself.” Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ It is worth noting, at this point, that at the heart of the question, the mental scheme “enthronement of the youthful spirit / pursuit of authenticity” (from Taylor’s theory, see our section 3), is not the only possible scheme; today, sociological studies can provide more complex schemes proper to our present digital era; the impact of technology on the younger generations is likely to weigh on their identity construction. Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that the latter scheme is not completely different from the former. It seems to me that there is a fundamental, more basic level of the phenomenon. Today, for

of authenticity is to “deconstruct faith,” I sustain that Christianity must be at any cost “inauthentic.” If authenticity is the price of youthfulness, then Christianity should resign itself to “being old,” for it cannot think of living its “own way,” neither can it avoid “surrendering to conformity” with the model of Christ. In fact, Christianity means faithfulness and obedience to Christ. Still, assuming all these assertions dogmatically would lead to an exclusive and maybe elitist Christianity, thus depriving it of its intrinsic Catholicity: “Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28: 19).²¹ For this reason, youthfulness on the one hand, and oldness on the other, should have a specific meaning when applied to Christianity or the Church: “They do not belong to the world just as I do not belong to the world” (Jn 17: 16). This is what, I believe, Bonhoeffer meant by “the perspective of the Church,” and our thinking “from” this perspective might help us overcome the dilemma of “modern” versus “old fashioned” or “youth” versus “Christian.” From this, I move to the last step of this reflection, with a question that has gradually been shaped from the beginning and can now finally be stated in these terms: Is there an old and inauthentic Christianity in Europe?

Drawing from the Church's Tradition

I shall first of all take into consideration what can be found in the Church's Tradition. Here, Tradition is intended in the sense given by the II Vatican Council, that is, in “a close connection and communication” with Sacred Scripture, both as “one sacred deposit of the word of God” (*unum verbi Dei sacrum depositum*).²² In this context, the biblical texts have a special place in the appraisal of the relationship between Christianity and youthfulness. Can the age-idea find an explanation in the Bible? We may ask. What is certain is that there are clear references to young and old people or realities in various biblical passages. But in order to grasp this particular meaning of youthfulness, given that we do not find any definition of it in the bible, I prefer an analysis of the more significant data that seem

example, the digital world cannot be considered a gap between the Church and young people; and even if these are born in this “new” world and become more and more comprehensible only within it, what stands between them and the Church is not technology per se – if that were the case, the problem would easily be solved by the use of digital means in youth ministry –, but it is rather what might be called an “age-gap”. This is why discussing the age-question is important, and Charles Taylor's theory of authenticity opens a fundamental path to a reflection on youthfulness in our time.

²¹ For all the Scripture quotations and abbreviations see *Revised New Jerusalem Bible*.

²² *Dei Verbum*, n°s. 8–10. This Dogmatic Constitution is referred to because it clearly states the main sources through which Divine Revelation is handed on: Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church (*Ecclesiae Magisterium*). We do not intend to explore the teachings of the Second Vatican Council as such – it is clear that the Constitutions *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* would have more to say about the Church –, but in the spirit of these teachings, our aim here is to draw from Scriptures and from early Christian writings, an understanding of “youthfulness” when applied to the Church; such a topic is not treated by the Second Vatican Council, and there is no reason to force it on its teachings. Thus, any reference to the Second Vatican Council and the recent Magisterium remain marginal.

to oppose it, that is, the references about “oldness;” this approach is analogously the *via negationis* mostly used in the Latin world.

Being “old” is expressed in various ways in biblical texts. We have a typical example in the Gospel according to Luke, especially in the nativity stories where some biographical descriptions are presented. It is said of the parents of John the Baptist, with an explicit reference to their age, that they “were both advanced in years” (Lk 1: 7 *προβεβηκότες ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις αὐτῶν ἦσαν*²³); the same expression returns as regards Elisabeth (see Lk 1: 18),²⁴ and it is used further for the eighty-four-year-old widow Anna (see Lk 2: 36-37). In addition, when the Greek form *γέρον* (see e.g.: Jn 3: 4; 21: 18) is not used to equally express “old age,” in the biblical texts we find either *πρέσβυς/πρεσβύτερης* or *πρεσβύτερος-α* (sometimes as a comparative: the “elder” between two sons or daughters, as in Gn 19: 31; 27: 1; Lk 15: 25; or among the people of a group, as in Jn 8: 9) – and in some cases it is used alongside a construction similar to the Lukan translation (“Old, well on in years”, as in Gn 18: 11; 24: 1; Jos 13: 1; 23: 1; 1 K 1: 1). Nevertheless, *πρεσβύτερος* does not only indicate age, but also leadership. In fact, in the New Testament, “Elders” (*πρεσβύτεροι*) indicate an early church office (see Ac 11:30; 15:4; 20:17; Tt 1: 5; Jm 5: 14). In the Jewish context, elders (זִקְנִים) are respected for piety and wisdom (see some Old Testament passages like Ex 3:16-18; Nb 11:16) and called upon to set an example to the people (see Jdt 8:9-36); in the Mishnah in particular, the elders are the bearers of the tradition;²⁵ this understanding finds its place even in the gospels, where elders are listed alongside chief priests (see Mt 16:21; Lk 9:22). It is worth noting that we equally find in biblical texts a positive view of elders, not simply as “bearers” of the tradition, but as *μάρτυρες* (witnesses): “As a fellow-elder myself, as a witness [*ὁ συμπρεσβύτερος καὶ μάρτυς*] to the sufferings of Christ, and as a sharer in the glory which is to be revealed, I urge the elders [*πρεσβυτέρους*] among you” (1 P 5: 1). Although these various hints cannot provide a full picture of the biblical understanding, they show at least that it is only by reinterpreting the reality of oldness “within” (and not away from) revealed truths, that we come closer to an understanding from the Christian perspective.

²³ For the Greek Scripture quotations: *The Greek New Testament*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014 (Fifth Revised Edition).

²⁴ More could be said about Elizabeth’s old age and barrenness in relation to childbearing (paradoxically, a clear sign of youthfulness), in the traditional line of the aged and barren women of the Old Testament: see for instance, Gn 17-18 (about Abraham and Sarai/Sarah); but this topic would go beyond the compass of this contribution. What I would like to draw attention to is simply the state of oldness as a “space” – biblically speaking – of God’s action and providence (see Lk 1: 36-37); it is the horizon of the fulfilment of His promises (see Gn 21:1); this reality of oldness does not oppose youthfulness in any way.

²⁵ Cf. Levine and Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 479.

In early Christian writings, one of the eminent places of the tension between the revelation of meaning and the plurality of interpretations about the oldness of Christianity and the Church, is the text of the *Shepherd of Hermas*. Many Church writers of the first centuries (Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Irenaeus, to name a few) have referred to this important text of early Christianity. Even today, when scholars want to either speak of the “old Church” or conjugate antiquity with the rejuvenated face of the Church in history, the authority of the *Shepherd* is often called upon. Yet, what is the understanding of this “old Church”? Is this awareness, owed to the message of the *Shepherd*, really faithful to it? Let us first of all consider the three forms of appearance of the Church in the “visions” of Hermas. He sees, firstly, “an elderly woman [γυνή πρεσβυτις] ...dressed in radiant clothes and holding a book in her hands;”²⁶ Hermas hears the astonishing words of this woman willingly. Later, he has another vision of the same “elderly woman,”²⁷ even though we learn further that she now appears in a slightly different form: with a “younger face” (ὄφιν νεωτέρα), and she is “more cheerful” (ίλαρωτέρα), although her skin and hair are still “older” (πρεσβυτέρα).²⁸ In this new vision, Hermas receives the book the woman was reading, and he copies it. While asleep, a young man reveals to him that the “elderly woman” (ἡ πρεσβυτέρα) from whom he received the little book is “the church” (ἡ ἐκκλησία),²⁹ and this revelation will be fulfilled by the woman’s own self-identification, when she will appear – in a third form – “very young and exceedingly beautiful” (νεωτέρα καί κάλλει) and will assert: “I, the church [ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ἐκκλησία].”³⁰ The reason as to why she appeared – in the first instance – elderly, is simply found in the Creator’s own design, and not in creation itself. Furthermore, what is characteristic of her elderliness – regardless of any symbolic language – is her great knowledge, which continuously appeals to Hermas; the numerous questions the latter will ask her are a clear proof of that. In fact, throughout these visions, the woman does not only reveal God’s truth to Hermas, but she interprets for him what he sees, through a consistent and dynamic teaching – while “seated on a chair” (ἐν καθέδρᾳ καθημένη) or “standing” (ἐστηκυῖα).³¹ I may say that she tutors an unexperienced man, and it cannot be denied that he was anything but bored.

Beyond the above facts, some other essential elements still need to be pointed out in the *Shepherd*. Hermas’ constant requests are rewarded by another interpretation – now given by a young man in a final instance – of the tripartite form of

²⁶ Shepherd, Vision I. 2.

All the traditional references of this text follow Ehrman’s edition (2003, 161-474).

²⁷ Ibid., II. 1.

²⁸ Ibid., III. 10.

²⁹ Ibid., II. 4.

³⁰ Ibid., III. 3.

³¹ Ibid., III. 10.

appearance of the woman in the visions.³² The logic behind this interpretation, in a word, is that everything that had been revealed to Hermas regarded nothing out of his own self; it was both a revelation and a prophecy: the oldness and the weak posture of the woman (the Church) on the one hand, and her youth and vigour on the other hand, all depicted the state of Hermas' own spiritual life. The church appeared to him as elderly because his own spirit is "elderly and already fading away, having no vigor because [he is] feeble and of two minds."³³ Thus, it may not be wrong to say that every discourse about the Church reveals one's own mindset; in this sense, the stress on conversion and reconciliation highlighted by many commentators of the *Shepherd* cannot be overlooked. Moreover, the Church presents itself in the *Shepherd*, as a reality that transcends our own perception, that is, not simply as how we imagine it or as "what it is for us," but, more still, as "what it is" in itself. This is clearly illustrated by the last appearance of the woman in the visions of Hermas, where the prophet, without any need of interpretation, simply "knew" that she was the Church, young and "virgin" (παρθένος), "clothed as if coming from a bridal chamber."³⁴

Reimagining Christianity in Europe

After a selective and certainly restricted look at the resource of the Church's Tradition, the real task now is to see how the relationship between Christianity and youthfulness can be restored, that is, freed from any preconception or assumption in our present awareness, so that it can be given for a new experience in Europe. Youth, as late Pope Francis wrote, "is more than simply a period of time; it is a state of mind. That is why an institution as ancient as the Church can experience renewal and a return to youth at different points in her age-old history."³⁵ The same Pope, interrogating the present awareness in his own way, warned the Christian faithful of certain attitudes that turn the life of the Church into a "museum piece."³⁶ These insights are absolutely important for the questions discussed so far. Nonetheless, admitting that youthfulness is a "state of mind" does not yet solve the problem, for we only separate youthfulness from the concrete person of the young, while still hunting "the beasts of authenticity"³⁷ with their pelts of age-determined youthfulness. It is necessary, therefore, to go beyond a purely psychological level to an ontological level: youthfulness, Christianly understood, is a state of being. Here we equally move from an anthropological level to a theological level, without leaving the point of departure behind but integrating it in a higher frame. The latter could be more adequate to host harmoniously the two-thousand-year Christianity in Europe and Youthfulness. This frame or space of encounter, in my opinion, is the "trinitarian space," because what youthfulness is

³² Ibid., III. 11-13.

³³ Ibid., III. 11.

³⁴ Ibid., IV. 2.

³⁵ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, n° 34.

³⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n° 95.

³⁷ Root, *Faith formation*, chap. 6.

for the Church can only be understood in the vital relations of the three Persons: the Father, who has granted the Son to have life in himself (Jn 5: 26), together with the Holy Spirit with whom the face of the earth is renewed (Ps 104: 30), the Triune God, bestows on the Church an unfading youthfulness.

If this youthfulness seems to be a far-fetched concept nowadays, it may be because the trinitarian mystery equally seems remote from Christian life. In fact, Hans Urs von Balthasar, in a work still famous today – more for its title than for its content – *Schleifung der Bastionen* (*Razing the Bastions*) with its significant subtitle *On the Church in this Age*, raises a fundamental question, which still needs to be given serious attention; von Balthasar asks: “What place does the doctrine about the triune God have in Christian existence?”³⁸ From the phrasing of the question, it is possible to intuit the problem posed by the Swiss theologian. He then precises further: “Christian proclamation in the school, from the pulpit, and in the lecture halls of the universities could be so much more alive, if *all* the theological tractates were given a completely trinitarian form!”³⁹ In the previous paragraphs, I tried to distinguish an age-determined youthfulness from vitality. Here we see that the vitality of Christianity, what makes its proclamation alive, for example, depends on its trinitarian form. Only in the life of the Triune God does Christianity really preserve its youthfulness. Von Balthasar’s words are much more explicit: “That which is old remains young only when it is drawn, with all the strength of youth, into relation with that which is still older, with that in time which is perpetual: the present-day revelation of God.”⁴⁰ This relation is fundamental, for it is the screen that displays the Church’s beauty and youthfulness. Being drawn into relation to the present-day revelation of God means, in essence, following the path of holiness. Another important writing of early Christianity, the *Epistle to Diognetus*, shows how the eternal youthfulness of the Word inhabits the disciples who have been considered faithful; the Son of the Father is the one “who is always being born anew in the hearts of the saints.”⁴¹ “Quite clearly, as von Balthasar writes, holiness is the best proof that the Church still has something, indeed everything, to say to the present and the coming time, despite her age and her wisdom of old age.”⁴²

³⁸ Balthasar, *Razing the Bastions*, 29.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 34.

⁴¹ *Epistle to Diognetus*, 11. 4. This reference follows Ehrman’s edition (2003, 121–159).

⁴² Balthasar, *Razing the Bastions*, 25.

A profound illustration on holiness is given further with saint Francis of Assisi: “Everything depends on the awareness that we have of our Christianity. For Francis, to be a Christian was something just as immense, certain and startlingly glorious as to be a human being, a youth, a man. And because being a Christian is eternal being and eternal youth, without danger of withering and resignation, his immediate joy was deeper. Not one single year separated him from Christ, the one who had become flesh; from the manger; from the Cross.”

Ibid., 32.

Envoi: Questions need no answers but a restatement

These last lines are neither summarising nor concluding what has been said, but they represent what the old French ballads used to call *envoi*, a part aimed at dedicating a theme to a specific person; in this case, this *envoi* goes to the present project, “Being Young - Being Catholic - Being European”. I think that the many questions that the different contributions of this volume put forward do not need to be answered at all costs, but what counts the most is a restatement of every question following the grammar of the Gospel and using the language of our present time. This contribution, for its part, has certainly not offered any answer – “interrogating” the present awareness was our purpose – except the very fact that it is worth thinking Christianity and youthfulness together (not *aut-aut*, but *et*). In the unfolding of this reflection, one may perceive the un-givenness of “Being Young - Being Catholic - Being European,” and from there, one may start a journey of questioning and restating what has already been questioned. In reflecting upon Christianity and youthfulness, it becomes clear how the *hodie* of Christian mystery and life is worth pondering.⁴³ We also discover the necessity of a personal experience of the living Church, for the Church cannot be a relic of the past but, as Romano Guardini wrote a century ago, “the Church is coming to life in the souls of men.”⁴⁴ I believe that the Memorial (“Do this in remembrance of me,” see 1 Co 11: 24-25) that actualises the Mystery of Easter in our Christian life is a sure path to reacquire the dynamism of the first Christian communities and to reexperience youthfulness.

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Von Balthasar will go as far as to say that youthfulness is “inherent” in our being Christian. Ibid., 33.

⁴³ This Latin word for “today” is highly significant, from a biblical and theological perspective. It is not just a chronological unit, but the *kairological* time and space where the Risen one draws us: “today [*hodie*] you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23: 43). And for those who partake of this glorious realm, being young or being old has no serious importance: “Youths may grow tired and weary, young people stumble and fall, but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will grow wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, walk but never tire.” (Is 40: 30-31)

⁴⁴ Guardini, *The Meaning of the Church*, 1.

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BETWEEN AGGIORNAMENTO AND CATHOLIC NEO-TRADITIONALISM: CATHOLIC NEO-TRADITIONALIST AND CONSERVATIVE THEOLOGIES ONLINE AND THE CHALLENGES FACED BY YOUNG PEOPLE IN NAVIGATING CYBER THEOLOGIES

Ruairi Sean Meyler

Abstract

This chapter examines the role the internet and social media play in the faith formation of young Catholics particularly in an increasingly secular and religiously pluralised Europe as religious young people strive to find community, deepen their faith, and navigate secular indifference and ridicule. In this search, they turn to Catholic influencers, who talk about and explore the Catholic faith. This chapter analyses the conservative and often neo-traditional theology of many of these influencers. The chapter argues that this neo-traditional theology arises as a response to uncertainty within the Church and in the world at large, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic and amidst growing economic uncertainty, demographic changes and increasing religious pluralisation in Europe. People also seek certainty with politicians on the European right, arguing for the reclamation of a civilisational Christian identity. To counter both of these tendencies towards neo-traditionalism and European Christianity, both the Catholic Church and the European community at large must embrace a more plural attitude that recognises Europe's historic diversity, and create a legal and political framework rooted in human dignity that caters for the religious needs of all. To this end, the chapter argues that the documents *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Religious Freedom for the Good of All* provide a starting point, enabling Europe and the Catholic tradition to embrace their innate Catholicity and to counter the temptations of both European Christianity and US Christian nationalism, as well as better navigate a changing and more diverse religious landscape in Europe. Both *Religious Freedom for the Good of All* and Pope Francis' document *Christus Vivit* likewise warn of the dangers of internet bubbles and encourage the young not to be chained by tradition but to use it as a starting point from which to proclaim and develop the Christian tradition. The chapter argues that being young, being Catholic, and being European today means acknowledging plurality both geographically and intellectually while also searching for meaning within a diverse and evolving landscape and bringing this into dialogue with the rich and ever-evolving tradition of Catholicism.

Introduction

The French Bishops' Conference reported that Easter 2025 saw the baptism of more than 10,384 adults, alongside 7,400 adolescents aged 11 to 17. The number of catechumens also increased as more and more people baptised as children wish to be confirmed in the faith.¹ A survey of nine hundred French catechumens conducted by *Famille Chrétienne* and *Aleteia* found that social media plays a key role in the spiritual journey of young people.² Sixty-eight percent of catechumens surveyed report engaging with videos on social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram to deepen their understanding of their faith, while in the UK, young adults are now twice as likely to attend the Catholic Church as opposed to the Church of England, with only twenty percent of young people identifying as Anglican in contrast to forty-one percent identifying as Catholic, and with eighteen percent Pentecostal.³ Mark Nash, director of the Agency for Evangelization and Catechesis at Southwark Cathedral, speculates that many young men are drawn to the Catholic Church through their engagement with Catholic social media influencers such as Bishop Robert Barron, Father Mike Schmitz, and Trent Horn.⁴ These statistics are counter-balanced by those from the Pew Research Center, which show that both France and the UK, while having a majority Christian population in 2010, as of 2020 no longer do.⁵ This reflects growing religious pluralisation throughout Europe, spurred on by the immigration of religious minorities into Europe in various phases following World War II.⁶ This immigration has challenged the ways in which religion and the state interact in Europe and, coupled with secularisation, has led to a changed religious landscape within Europe, and complicates the picture of religious revival which the previously cited statistics hint at.⁷ This chapter will explore the role that social media and the internet are playing in young people's conversion or return to the Catholic faith.

The role of the internet in conversion and theological formation

Pope Francis in his post-synodal exhortation to young people, *Christus Vivit*, states that the internet is a public square where the young spend much of their time.⁸ He also notes the pastoral opportunities provided by the internet, as well as noting its dark side, such as its control by corporations and its tendency to promote echo chambers and connect people that think alike.⁹ Officially, the Church and Francis in particular seem to acknowledge the dual aspects of the

¹ Église Catholique en France, "Adult Baptisms."

² Kléan, "Survey."

³ Tomlinson, "Surge."

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Hackett et al., "Global Religious Landscape."

⁶ Davie, "Religion," 280.

⁷ Sealy et al., "Managing Religious Diversity," 568.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, n° 87.

⁹ Ibid., n° 89.

internet and the ways it can be used for positive or negative ends. An example of the pastoral outreach that Francis speaks of is the rise of the Catholic social media influencer. These include figures such as Father Mike Schmitz, Bishop Robert Barron, and Trent Horn, who speak about and promote the Catholic faith online.¹⁰ This is also seen in the rise of several Catholic podcasts, mostly in the US, with a catechetical dimension, such as *Pints with Aquinas* by Matt Fradd, in which he discusses various topics within the Catholic faith through a Thomistic lens, while Trent Horn's *The Council of Trent* explains and defends Church teaching by expounding apologetic arguments. These podcasts also invite various guests on to talk about their experience and knowledge of the faith and debate issues within the Catholic Church.¹¹ Catholic podcasts and the broader phenomenon of Catholic influencers chime with the assertion of the catechetical directory, which acknowledged that storytelling is the language of the youth today,¹² while also echoing Pope Paul VI's assertion in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* that authentic witness will be more attractive to young people today.¹³ Therefore, we can see the popularity of Catholic social media influencers, as well as Catholic podcasts, is filling a catechetical need and reaching out to the young while also chiming with a hunger among the young to deepen and enrich their faith practice.

A study which explores the quest for religious purity among Dutch youth in new age, evangelical, and Islamic religions finds that this quest is not a search for a surface spirituality, but a desire to go beyond religious institutions to a deeper and more nourishing form of faith that goes beyond religious institutions and religious indifferentism.¹⁴ This quest for authentic religion in Europe today often leads to a personal search and the cultivation of a certain degree of bricolage, as youth pick and choose the bits of religious experience that resonate with them.¹⁵ However, as Danièle Hervieu-Léger points out, this personal search does not preclude one's search for community, as people strive to find those engaged in a similar religious search to them or find communities in which they can practise their faith.¹⁶ This perspective is echoed by a study conducted among religious youth in Austria, which found that many gravitated towards social media in order to find and create community, as they found that secularism was presumed to be the default position by most of their peers.¹⁷ As such, they sought out spaces where they could express their religious belief without ridicule.¹⁸ This echoes Charles Taylor's definition of the secular, in which the modern secular age is one

¹⁰ Theng, "Catholicism and Social Media," 270.

¹¹ Puggedá, "Catechesis," 75.

¹² *Ibid.*, 72.

¹³ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n° 76.

¹⁴ Roeland et al., "Quest for Religious Purity," 297.

¹⁵ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 195.

¹⁶ Hervieu-Léger, "Roman Catholicism," 452.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 457.

¹⁸ Novak et al., "Religious 'Bubbles'," 10.

in which religion is one option among many and frequently not the easiest to embrace.¹⁹ As such, this study of Austrian youth found that the internet provided a space for religious reflection as well as cultivating religious bubbles in which the young interacted with people from their own (mostly Christian) traditions. Despite the easy access to other religions on the internet, the study found that these religious bubbles were often cultivated along denominational or traditional lines, with surprisingly little interfaith interaction.²⁰

Catholic conservatism, neo-traditionalism, and the new apologetics

These trends of a search for religious authenticity, bricolage, and religious insularity are also echoed in the US context where, as Massimo Faggioli points out, due to the lack of dialogue between ecclesiastical and university theology, many young people in search of spiritual guidance and nourishment are turning to the Latin Mass and the aforementioned Catholic podcasters for their guidance and advice.²¹ As Faggioli also points out, many Catholic converts may see the Church Fathers and the catechism as more important than the conciliar documents or the pronouncements of the official Church, instead following the lead of Catholic podcasters and commentators.²² These Catholic converts are (in the case of the United States) heavily influenced by the new apologists, most notably Scott Hahn and Peter Kreeft.²³ These new Catholic apologists in particular draw on the work of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century apologists such as G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc,²⁴ as well as the work of those influenced by them such as C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien who, as Alison Milbank argues, were deeply influenced by Chesterton.²⁵ Kreeft in particular places Tolkien firmly within the Christian tradition, even comparing Pope John Paul and Benedict XVI to Frodo and Sam respectively – two of the main characters from Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* – with Kreeft seeing both Pope John Paul and Pope Benedict as the chief preservers and interpreters of the true message of Vatican II,²⁶ in the process echoing the perspective of those who Ross Douthat calls “Pope John Paul II Catholics”: those who accept Vatican II, endorsing what they see as the Orthodox interpretation of that council by John Paul and Benedict, but rejecting what they see as a hijacking of the council by those who go against the interpretation of Pope John Paul and Pope Benedict and who see the council in their eyes as a tool of reform and distort its teaching.²⁷

¹⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

²⁰ Novak et al., “Religious ‘Bubbles’,” 10.

²¹ Faggioli, *Joe Biden*, 140.

²² Faggioli, *Theology and Catholic Higher Education*, 55.

²³ Huff, “New Apologists,” 245.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 247.

²⁵ Milbank, *Chesterton and Tolkien*, x.

²⁶ Kreeft, *How to Destroy Western Civilization*, 88.

²⁷ Douthat, *To Change the Church*, 30.

Tridentine neo-traditionalism among conservative Catholics in the US

Conservative Catholicism, particularly in the US, has shifted since the resignation of Pope Benedict as they have come to reject not just the spirit or wrong interpretation of the council, but the council entirely, and moved towards neotraditional Catholicism. This shift can be seen in the opposition that emerged following the election of Pope Francis,²⁸ and also in the case of a certain bricolage among US Catholics as they pick and choose which aspects of the Church's teaching to accept and reject in the name of fidelity to a pure, authentic and largely self-discerned Catholicism.²⁹ This turn is evident in both Peter Kreeft and Scott Hahn, who have expressed a reverence, devotion, and even love for the Latin Mass.³⁰ Tridentine traditionalists are those who reject Vatican II and continue to practise the Latin rite and uphold the pre-Vatican II liturgy and doctrine.³¹

This Tridentine tendency can then be divided into three strands. The Society of Saint Pius X, who were founded by the French archbishop Marcel Lefebvre and who practise the Latin Mass and reject what they see as the Church's accommodations to modernity and capitulations to modernism, and have established their own line of priests beginning in 1988, which resulted in the excommunication of Lefebvre and the other members of the society.³² Then there are those members of the *Ecclesia Dei* communities, those who, while wishing to retain Tridentine practices and continue with the older Latin Mass, were uncomfortable with Marcel Lefebvre's decision to ordain bishops, and were given a special dispensation by Pope John Paul II to celebrate the Latin Mass and were welcomed back into the Catholic Church.³³ These groups in theory endorse Vatican II, while still nonetheless continuing with and perpetuating pre-Vatican II practices and beliefs. Then there are the sedevacantists, those who believe, following the writings of Joaquín Sáenz y Arriaga, that due to the radical nature of Vatican II's teaching that all the popes since Pius XII have been illegitimately elected and hence that there has been no legitimate pope since Pius.³⁴

Catholic podcasters such as Matt Fradd have even hosted debates with sedevacantists, in the process promoting their ideas.³⁵ Indeed, the traditional Latin Mass has found a home online due to its controversial and highly mediated nature, with the internet initially being used to spread the word of when Masses were taking place. However, now traditional Latin Mass practitioners have taken

²⁸ Faggioli, *Theology and Catholic Higher Education*, 50.

²⁹ Ibid., 74.

³⁰ Fradd, "Scott Hahn"; Mass of the Ages, "Dr. Peter Kreeft."

³¹ Dinges and Hitchcock, "Roman Catholic Traditionalism," 67.

³² Roy-Lysencourt, "Reception of the Second Vatican Council," 472.

³³ Ibid., 476.

³⁴ Ibid., 473.

³⁵ Fradd, "Sedevacantism Debate."

full advantage of the Tridentine rite's aesthetic dimensions, setting up Instagram pages on which are seen highly baroque and ornate liturgies which engage and arouse the interest of the young, particularly in the US, and responds to a need for a seemingly authentic and extra-institutional version of their faith.³⁶ The rise of the traditional Latin Mass also fits with the separatism and hyper-orthodoxy of many new apologists such as Peter Kreeft, Scott Hahn, and their successors Trent Horn and Matt Fradd, who are suspicious of the surrounding culture and see their role as both defending the Catholic Church apologetically, evangelising magisterial Protestants and fundamentalists, and re-evangelising liberal Catholics. As such, following the end of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict's pontificates, it makes sense that these hyper-orthodox apologists would drift towards the Latin Mass, as it offers both a separatist and seemingly ritually pure Catholicism.³⁷ However, this insularity and separatism have their problems. For one thing, as Mark S. Massa points out in *Catholic Fundamentalism in America*, it rejects the universality that is core to the Catholic faith,³⁸ and as Pope Francis states, it cultivates an isolated conscience which traps us in our ways of thinking and isolates us from the broader body of the Church and leads to polarisation.³⁹

Francis's view of the isolated conscience echoes Augustine's notion of the soul curved in on itself,⁴⁰ and in many ways is a solid theological analysis of the perils that this new age of algorithm-driven theological formation poses for the Church, as one can easily become stuck in one's own worldview of theological convictions, unable to listen to others both within and outside the Church, engaging in separatism rather than Catholicism. For Francis, the beauty of the Catholic tradition and the Holy Spirit working within it is its ability to harmonise differences and accept contradictions and tensions.⁴¹ Indeed, papal warnings against the dangers of separatism are also echoed by Pope Paul VI, in which he cautions that local ecclesial communities must bear in mind the universal Church and vice versa.⁴² However, as we have seen, both the rise of religious bubbles on social media and the increasing popularity of the Latin Mass make separatism a real possibility in the Church today. Indeed, according to a recent study of Catholics in the US, many people are attracted to the Latin Mass due to its presumed higher reverence, or because they are curious to see a different form of the Mass and then they quickly become enmeshed in the community and its attendant theology.⁴³ This theology, as Massimo Faggioli writes, disregards the global changes that have taken place in Catholicism and ignores the polarity and diversity of the

³⁶ Theng, "Catholicism and Social Media," 271.

³⁷ Huff, "New Apologists," 258.

³⁸ Massa, *Catholic Fundamentalism in America*, 14.

³⁹ Pope Francis and Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream*, 53.

⁴⁰ Jenson, *Gravity of Sin*, 7.

⁴¹ Pope Francis and Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream*, 61.

⁴² Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n° 63.

⁴³ Thomas, "Mass of the Ages," 5, 9.

Church today.⁴⁴ In addition, the theology of the new apologists is primarily apologetic rather than investigative,⁴⁵ preferring a neo-scholastic style of theology. This can best be described as a form of theology which emerged in the eighteenth century and was dominant up until the Second Vatican Council and promoted a rote form of theology based on the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas.⁴⁶ It depicted Aquinas as a thinker whose crystal-clear logic does not tolerate dissension,⁴⁷ and it is this pre-Vatican II form of theology which is practised in Latin Mass circles and popular with Catholic podcasters such as Matt Fradd, who view Thomas Aquinas as the definitive doctrinal authority.⁴⁸

Furthermore, as Faggioli points out, the pre-Vatican II vision of theology would reduce theology to a primarily clerical pursuit and apologetic exercise as it strives for fixed routes and certainties.⁴⁹ The reality is the Church in Europe and the Church at large cannot afford to fall into such nostalgia, due to both the changing religious landscape of Europe and the ways in which young people's spiritual journey is taking on much more questioning and searching forms, as Michael A. Conway points out.⁵⁰ Therefore, the Church needs to embrace a more apophatic theology, comfortable with doubt, and accompany people in their questions,⁵¹ and the more invitational tone of Vatican II is a much better tool for achieving this.

A more dialogical and pastoral tone that seeks to prompt conversion and open up a conversation is required in the modern religious landscape,⁵² as opposed to the neo-scholastic theology of neo-traditionalists and Catholic influencers such as Trent Horn who, like Popes Pius IX and Leo XIII as well as Pius XI and XII, seek to demonstrate the incompatibility of Catholicism and socialism,⁵³ in the process ignoring both the post-Vatican II emergence of liberation theology and its focus on the inequalities between rich and poor,⁵⁴ as well as the vast body of Catholic social teaching, which tries to find the middle way between capitalism and socialism.⁵⁵ Trent Horn instead more broadly aligns himself with the broader Chris-

⁴⁴ Faggioli, *True Reform*, 164.

⁴⁵ Dinges and Hitchcock, "Roman Catholic Traditionalism," 82.

⁴⁶ Pierce, "Modernity and Anti-Modernism," 302.

⁴⁷ Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 44.

⁴⁸ Lit, "Reconsidering Arabic Roots," 2.

⁴⁹ Faggioli, *Theology and Catholic Higher Education*, 115.

⁵⁰ Conway, *Vetera novis augere*, 149.

⁵¹ Radcliffe, *What is the Point*, 43.

⁵² O'Malley, *What Happened*, 52.

⁵³ Wetzel, "Catholic Alt-Right," 39.

⁵⁴ Fiorenza, "Systematic Theology," 48.

⁵⁵ Coppa, *Papacy in the Modern World*, 97.

tian and conservative right rather than Catholic theology in this case, manipulating the Catholic tradition in order to fit it into the US culture wars.⁵⁶ This demonstrates that the separatism of many US Catholics is driven by politics, not devotion.

Resources within the Catholic tradition to deal with the challenges of globalisation and pluralisation

The current landscape of the US, indeed a return to pre-Vatican II liturgy and doctrine, would not fit the European context where, in places such as France, there has been a shift from a mono-confessional Catholic population to a plural religious state made up of mostly migrant religions, in which the secular concept of *laïcité* and the role of religion within the French state has become hotly contested.⁵⁷ Indeed, the increasing visibility of religion in the public sphere is seen across Europe today and poses unique challenges.⁵⁸ In this context, the theological resources of Vatican II are particularly useful, most notably *Nostra Aetate*, which affirms the dignity and goodness to be found in all religious traditions,⁵⁹ and the *Declaration on Religious Freedom, Dignitatis Humanae*, which affirms the right of every human being to worship according to their conscience.⁶⁰

The fundamental plurality and Catholicity of the documents of Vatican II's theology is also echoed in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium*, which promotes variety and a process of adaptation and enculturation in liturgical expression.⁶¹ This does not mean, however, a blind multiculturalism, but an openness rooted in one's own convictions. As Pope Francis pointed out in *Evangelii Gaudium*, we need a culture of encounter in which people remain rooted in their own tradition while open to and willing to dialogue with the position of the other in the spirit of true religious dialogue.⁶²

Pope John Paul II also acknowledged the challenges posed by immigration both by the immigrants themselves and to the home country, but nonetheless urged Muslim immigrants in particular to embrace their religion as not only a necessity of religious freedom but also as a sign and a challenge to Christians to deepen their own piety.⁶³ In this way, he expressed not only the value of religious freedom, but also the ways in which religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue can enrich and impact faith communities, challenging religious believers to engage not only with other traditions but, through the example of the other, to

⁵⁶ Wetzel, "Catholic Alt-Right," 39.

⁵⁷ Chelini-Pont, "France," 629.

⁵⁸ Sealy et al., "Managing Religious Diversity," 581.

⁵⁹ Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, n° 2.

⁶⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis Humanae*, n° 3.

⁶¹ Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n° 40.

⁶² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n° 251.

⁶³ Abu-Rabi, "John Paul II and Islam," 192.

deepen their own spiritual practice. The value of religious plurality and the ways in which it can deepen our religious practice need to be borne in mind. Pope John Paul in this statement also echoes the Vatican II document *Ad Gentes: On the mission activity of the Church*, which speaks of the need for Christians and religious communities in general to identify the seeds of the word in their own cultural contexts, i.e. those things which speak and communicate the truth of God.⁶⁴ This is a concept that goes back to Justin Martyr and Clement and is echoed by *Dignitatis Humanae*, which speaks of the common search for truth in all societies.⁶⁵ It is this common search for truth that needs to be undertaken in an increasingly pluralised Europe today, and Europe also needs to recover its historic plurality which is evident in the impact Islamic thought had on the writings of Thomas Aquinas, for example.⁶⁶ This is in addition to the ways in which Islamic culture influenced the Iberian peninsula and sowed the seeds for the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Renaissance.⁶⁷ In this way, Europe needs to recover a sense of its historic pluralism in order to deal with contemporary religious pluralisation. It also needs to heed the words of *Ad Gentes*, which says that people should be proud of their nation and heritage without falling into exclusion, separatism, or sectarianism.⁶⁸

Countering the dangers of civilisational Christianity and Christian nationalism

Indeed, this is a real possibility in Europe today, as many people turn to more extreme forms of nationalism to counter globalisation, with many right-wing parties in France, the Netherlands, and Norway, for example, adopting a nominal Christian identity to counter what they see as threats to Western civilisation from an Islamic Other.⁶⁹ As demonstrated, this narrative is challenged by the evident diversity of medieval Europe and the interactions between Christians, Muslims, and Jews in the Iberian peninsula in particular and the ways in which this contributed to European culture. The Vatican document *Religious Freedom for the Good of All* likewise warns against the extremes of either a militant secularist or theocratic tendency that seeks to unite and mix politics and religion, arguing instead for a religious pluralism that acknowledges the dignity of the human person and the religious freedom that flows from this.⁷⁰ This conviction, as we have seen, is rooted in *Dignitatis Humanae*, the *Declaration on Religious Freedom*. In this way, both the *Declaration on Religious Freedom* and the Vatican document *Religious Freedom for the Good of All* provide a counter to the narrative of both a

⁶⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, n° 11.

⁶⁵ Chia, "The Church and Other Religions," 311; Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis Humanae*, n° 3.

⁶⁶ Sudworth, "End of Empire," 243.

⁶⁷ Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 192.

⁶⁸ Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, n° 15.

⁶⁹ Brubaker, "Between nationalism and civilizationism," 1193.

⁷⁰ International Theological Commission, *Religious Freedom*, n° 61.

civilisational Christianity in Europe (as previously mentioned) and also a Christian nationalist tendency in the United States. Christian nationalism is defined as:

“a political theology that seeks a privileged place for a particular form of Christianity in American public life [...] This theology is at once both descriptive and prescriptive: American Christian nationalists believe that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and that the government and its Christian citizens should take steps to keep it that way.”⁷¹

Catholic Christian nationalists promote what they see as integralism.⁷² According to this group, the problems of liberalism can only be solved by transforming the state into an entity that promotes human flourishing as understood by the Catholic tradition, or to be more accurate as understood by the integralist interpretation of that tradition, with the state being subordinated to and perfected by the teachings of the Church in a symbiotic relationship between Church and state in which the Church has jurisdiction over Catholics and non-Catholics.

This integralist mindset is a more extreme version of Robert Bellarmine’s concept of *potestas indirecta*, in which the Pope and by extension the Church have influence in civil matters by virtue of their moral authority and responsibility for the salvation of souls.⁷³ For Bellarmine, as for the Catholic integralists, the state, i.e. the body, must obey the soul, i.e. the Pope and the Church, in order to be rightly ordered. Where Bellarmine parts company with the integralists is where he argues that the Church has moral authority to influence and care for souls and can interfere in some cases, but ultimately, its jurisdiction is separate from while related to the civil authority, as Jesus sought no temporal authority.⁷⁴ Likewise, the document *Religious Freedom for the Good of All* cites the Gospels, arguing for Jesus as being in the tradition of the Hebrew Bible prophets who critique political power and sought no temporal jurisdiction. The document also emphasises Paul’s commandment to obey, work within, and respect the civil authority rather than supplant it.⁷⁵

Both these traditions emphasise a certain separation between Church and state and act as a counterpoint to the current growth of Christian nationalism in the United States and the civilisational Christianity among the European right. The document *Religious Freedom for the Good of All* also warns against the ways in which the internet can trap people in bubbles and manipulate consciences,⁷⁶ and echoes the sentiment of Francis that immigrants bring their religion with them

⁷¹ Saiya, “Varieties,” 171.

⁷² Saiya, “Varieties,” 181.

⁷³ Höpfl, *Jesuit Political Thought*, 362.

⁷⁴ Tutino, *Empire of Souls*, 45.

⁷⁵ International Theological Commission, *Religious Freedom*, n° 56.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, n° 52.

and this religious expression should be embraced in the name of building a religiously plural and free society that enables the maintenance of moral order and the public good.⁷⁷ However, such a pluralism is struggling in the face of the inequalities of globalisation. This is illustrated by the transformation of Belgium and the Netherlands from mono-confessional states into religiously plural ones, as seen in the growth of religious minorities that have been treated with indifference and discrimination in the French context in the name of religious neutrality.⁷⁸ This, as the document *Religious Freedom for the Good of All* points out, is more often a religious hostility and indifference that has the effect of restricting rather than enabling religious freedom,⁷⁹ and as we have seen in the case of the Austrian study, has the tendency to push people into religious bubbles which can become radicalised.

The Latin Mass, the contradictions and attractions of neo-traditionalism

The search for a nostalgic certainty is what is partly driving young people's interest in the Latin Mass, as they search for something seemingly fixed and eternal in an ever-changing world,⁸⁰ when in reality, the current Latin Mass trend and its theology have their roots in the tumultuous period of the French Revolution, and its aftermath during which the Church attempted to insulate itself from and fight against what it saw as the evils of modernity with quite destructive consequences, as seen for example, during the Modernist crisis.⁸¹

Many proponents of the Latin Mass such as Taylor Marshall often repeat the anti-Modernist talking points of Pius IX and Pius X⁸² and invoke and recruit figures like Tolkien to their cause. They claim that Tolkien, for instance, totally rejected the reforms of Vatican II,⁸³ when in reality, if we look at his letters, his position is much more nuanced, as he accepts the notion of development of doctrine core to the Second Vatican Council and first proposed by John Henry Newman in *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, in which Newman states that the Christian tradition, by virtue of its vitality, changes and develops while still maintaining its core identity and roots.⁸⁴ Therefore, we can see from Tolkien's letters that he did not oppose the growth, development, and change of the Second Vatican Council.⁸⁵ He simply lamented the loss of Latin – a language he spoke

⁷⁷ Ibid., n°s 67 and 64.

⁷⁸ Davie, "Religion," 281.

⁷⁹ International Theological Commission, *Religious Freedom*, n° 63.

⁸⁰ Thomas, "Mass of the Ages," 7.

⁸¹ Pierce, "Modernity and Anti-Modernism," 300.

⁸² Marshall, *Infiltration*, 39.

⁸³ Ibid., 116.

⁸⁴ Newman, *Essay on the Development*, 41.

⁸⁵ Carpenter and Tolkien, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 563.

very well⁸⁶ – and therefore the liturgical changes of Vatican II were not designed for educated laymen like him who understood and fully participated in the liturgy, but rather those who failed to participate due to their lack of liturgical understanding. He further commended the ecumenical efforts of Vatican II, of which the change in the vernacular was central, as seen in the comments of the Melkite archbishop who pointed out that Latin was not the sole liturgical language of the Church. Consequently, by acknowledging and permitting the use of the vernacular within the Roman rite, the Church opened the door to greater ecumenical dialogue and greater varieties of liturgical expression.⁸⁷

Furthermore, we can see that Tolkien also did not sign the petition calling for a return of the Latin Mass, which was signed by Evelyn Waugh and Agatha Christie among other famous English writers.⁸⁸ Marshall's designation of Tolkien as a traditionalist is simplistic and fails to take account of his letters and nuanced analysis of the changes of Vatican II which cannot be boiled down to a simple neo-traditionalism.⁸⁹ Tolkien accepted the need for the Church to change, endorsing Newman's concept of the development of doctrine, while being reticent about the changes taking place. This view of the vitality of the Christian tradition and its need to change is reiterated by Pope Francis: who states that we cannot retreat into a nostalgia but must embrace the current time in which we are called to proclaim the Gospel with all its challenges. Indeed, for Francis, roots are not anchors chaining us to the past, but stable grounding points from which we can move forward and carry on the tradition.⁹⁰

This also echoes the perspective of John XXIII, who, while acknowledging the beauty and value of the tradition, also encouraged the Church to engage its current context with all its opportunities and challenges.⁹¹ Likewise, Pope Benedict XVI referred to the Church as a living tree which must change, grow, and develop. Therefore, in this statement, we can see that Benedict XVI acknowledges the vitality and development of the Church.⁹² The stress on the Tridentine Mass propagated by Marshall and Gommaar De Pauw among others ignores the rich variety of liturgical rites within the Western Church, such as the Ambrosian Rite, Carthusian Rite, and Cistercian Rite,⁹³ which were only curtailed due to the 1853 encyclical *Inter Multiplices* by Pope Pius IX, which mandated a conformity to the Roman rite in all cases.⁹⁴

⁸⁶ Ordway, *Tolkien's Faith*, 428.

⁸⁷ O'Malley, *What Happened*, 147.

⁸⁸ Ordway, *Tolkien's Faith*, 432.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 424.

⁹⁰ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, n° 200.

⁹¹ O'Malley, *What Happened*, 47.

⁹² Pope Benedict XVI, *Meeting with Bishops*.

⁹³ Massa, *Catholic Fundamentalism in America*, 60.

⁹⁴ O'Malley, *Vatican I*, 94.

By examining the history, therefore, we see that the Tridentine rite and its dominance is not universal and timeless but historically contingent. Indeed, while Gommar De Pauw, the Belgian-born priest turned neo-traditionalist Catholic, says that American Catholics reject the liturgical reforms of Vatican II,⁹⁵ other studies have shown that American Catholics support the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council with no desire to return to the Latin Mass,⁹⁶ and even that some of those who attend traditional Latin Masses on a regular basis in some ways prefer the *Novus Ordo* Vatican II Mass and simply attend out of loyalty to their spouse.⁹⁷

However, the Latin Mass does contain some features which chime with and speak to the young, for instance, a presumed higher reverence. The silence of the Latin Mass is appreciated, as is the structure of more passive participation which chimes with young people's experiences of Zoom meetings during the pandemic and, as stated previously, the nostalgia of the liturgy and theology provides a pseudo-certainty in an uncertain world.⁹⁸ The downside is, however, as Massimo Faggioli points out, it brings the Church back into that dictatorial and defensive Tridentine mindset which the reforms of Vatican II aimed to bring the Church away from by breaking down the Church's fortress mentality and cultivating a more invitational tone.⁹⁹ However, the Latin Mass trend seeks to ignore the global changes of the Church and cling instead to old certainties that are comforting but not necessarily life-giving. This is a temptation which the Church globally must avoid and cannot afford if it wishes to deal with the changing religious landscape in which the European and broader Catholic Church finds itself. The Church however needs to recognise how the internet has contributed to the revival of this kind of Catholicism and its attractions and positive features, such as its greater emphasis on silence and the ways in which we can incorporate more contemplation and ceremony in our liturgy. The Church also needs to recognise the power of internet communication and connectedness as well as its dangers and its abilities to theologically form or deform believers of all ages.¹⁰⁰ The young Catholics of today need to become aware of the historical contingency of tradition and its universality and plurality, utilising online resources while not becoming consumed by them and being rooted in and in dialogue with a strong community of believers so as not to fall victim to the isolated conscience mentality of which Pope Francis speaks.

⁹⁵ Massa, *Catholic Fundamentalism in America*, 74.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁹⁷ Thomas, "Mass of the Ages," 5.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹⁹ Faggioli, *True Reform*, 53.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas, "Mass of the Ages," 7.

Navigating Europe's changed religious landscape

Europe also needs to adopt a more comprehensive and nuanced religious literacy that places the values of tolerance and plurality at its centre. As such, it could learn and draw from both the principles of *Dignitatis Humanae* and the document *Religious Freedom for the Good of All*. These documents promote a pluralism that deeply respects all religious traditions on the basis of human dignity rather than trying to fit them into the mould and values of a pre-determined secular Christian structure. Indeed, Europe needs to come to terms with its religious diversity and its mixed market status, as in most countries such as France, Ireland, Spain, Belgium, and Luxembourg, while Catholicism was dominant, with its cultural legacy looming large, other religions have entered the marketplace. These new religions must be taken seriously, even though they are shaped and impacted by their position in relation to the previously dominant state religion, this being Catholicism in the case of France, Spain, and Ireland, for example.

Therefore, ultimately Europe needs to acknowledge the historic roots and power of these religious traditions and the religion-state frameworks which were built to accommodate them, such as the denominational frameworks to be found in Belgium and Luxembourg, as well as the ways in which newer and migrant religions are impacted by this mixed religious market and historical Church-state framework for good and ill, adopting a principled, pluralist framework that is able to acknowledge the historical limitations of Church-state relations in Europe while also providing and catering for the multiplicity of people's religious needs through a framework that values and appreciates all religious traditions and the positive contributions they can make to the state, as well as the ways in which members of these religious communities can become valued citizens.¹⁰¹ One way to achieve this is for Europe to recover its historical and moral pluralism, acknowledging its historic diversity and rich Catholic tradition to deal with the challenges of the present moment both on and offline, particularly in the cases of Spain and Ireland, as our argument demonstrates.

Conclusion

In summary, we have seen that social media and the internet play a role in the formation of young Catholics, particularly in an increasingly secular and religiously pluralised Europe as religious young people strive to find community, deepen their faith, and navigate secular indifference and ridicule, as indicated by the Austrian study. In this search, they turn to Catholic religious influencers, who talk about and explore the Catholic faith, and this leads them to the US context in particular.

¹⁰¹ Ganiel, *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland*, 230.

These Catholic religious influencers and podcasters are very influential and are themselves influenced by the new apologists, who draw on the writings of the apologists of the Catholic revival, mainly Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, and Chesterton's successors and disciples, most notably Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. They also, as we have seen in the case of Peter Kreeft and Scott Hahn, embraced a conservative reading of Vatican II, endorsing the interpretations put forward by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. However, after Pope Benedict's resignation from the papacy, these apologists started to drift more and more towards the traditional Latin Mass, which not only seeks to promote a pre-Vatican II liturgy, but also a pre-Vatican II theology and view of the Church. This view is hostile to and suspicious of modernity and seeks to unite Church and state, reviving not just liturgy, but the old antagonisms, prejudices, and insularity of the Church. This arises as a response to uncertainty within the Church and in the world at large, as post-pandemic and with growing economic uncertainty and demographic changes and religious pluralisation in Europe. People seek certainty with politicians on the European right, arguing for the reclamation of a civilisational Christian identity. To counter this, both the Catholic Church and the European community at large must embrace a more plural attitude that recognises Europe's historic diversity, and create a legal and political framework rooted in human dignity that caters for the religious needs of all.

To this end, the documents *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Religious Freedom for the Good of All* provide a good starting point and enable both Europe and the Catholic tradition to embrace their innate Catholicity and counter the temptations of both European Christianity and US Christian nationalism, as well as better navigate a changing and more diverse religious landscape in Europe. Both *Religious Freedom for the Good of All* and Pope Francis' document *Christus Vivit* likewise warn of the dangers of internet bubbles and encourage the young not to be chained by tradition but to use it as a starting point from which to proclaim and develop the Christian tradition. This mindset and these writings therefore help young Europeans navigate the complex world of cyber theologies, allowing them to contribute positively to their European contexts. These writings discussed provide Europe with an engaged and plural religious vision, which enables it to navigate both the politicisation of religion as well as secularisation and religious indifference. This ecclesiological vision must also acknowledge and avoid the impact of neo-traditional Catholicism, embracing instead the more dialogical approach of Vatican II, which is much more suited to the religiously pluralistic and sceptical European context. Therefore, being young, being Catholic, and being European today means acknowledging plurality both geographically and intellectually while also searching for meaning within a diverse and evolving landscape, bringing this into dialogue with the rich, grounded, and ever-evolving tradition of Catholicism.

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LEARNING FROM THE ‘OTHER’: AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTIONS ON THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, THEOLOGY AND LGBTQ+ MATTERS

Jade Willaert

Abstract

The contemporary Catholic Church, in Europe and beyond, is characterised by an increasing level of plurality. Diverse theological, ethical, and cultural positions coexist, alongside competing understandings of what counts as normative. In this context, debates related to gender and sexuality, and particularly about LGBTQ+ matters, have emerged as a source of tension. In September 2025, Pope Leo XIV came to the conclusion in an interview that “any issue dealing with the LGBTQ questions is highly polarizing within the Church.”

This chapter explores *why* conversations about contested topics such as LGBTQ+ matters often prove difficult in the Catholic Church. To answer this question, it presents two vignettes based on the author’s own experiences of participating in conversations about LGBTQ+ matters in the context of the Belgian Catholic Church. These autoethnographic vignettes illustrate that these attempts indeed often become sites of discomfort, confusion, and disappointment rather than dialogue or learning from our imagined “others”.

This chapter aims to move beyond this diagnosis by foregrounding and questioning the conditions shaping these interactions. Building on Amy Edmondson’s theory of psychological safety and conceptualisation of learning, it is argued that the apparent difficulty of engaging these topics in the Catholic Church cannot be attributed solely to the so-called sensitive topic at hand, the apparent increase in plurality or polarisation in the (European) Catholic Church, or the intentions or communicative competence of the individuals participating in the conversation. In fact, it is the institutional habits and power imbalances shaping these conversations that play an important role.

The “Being Young – Being Catholic – Being European” book project starts from the observation that “Christianity in Europe is experiencing a time of epochal transformation processes.”¹ The Catholic Church has long been perceived as a monolithic institution that represents a single, normative narrative, and prefers harmony and unity over disagreement or conflict. At the same time, it has become increasingly clear that multiple theological, ethical, and cultural positions coexist within the Catholic Church and among its members. This plurality is particularly

¹ Ryan, Van Rompaey, and Quisinsky, *Being Young – Being Catholic – Being European*, 2.

visible in debates around gender, sexuality, and LGBTQ+. As Pope Leo XIV observed in a 2025 interview with Crux: “As we’ve seen at the synod, any issue dealing with the LGBTQ questions is highly polarizing within the Church.”² In that same interview, the Pope noted that some Catholics, particularly in Northern Europe, relate to these topics in ways that differ both from Church teaching and from attitudes common in other parts of the Catholic world.³

Against this background of increasing plurality and polarisation, this chapter asks: *Why* do attempts at dialogue about contested topics often prove difficult within the Catholic Church? Or, in other words, *what elements* make it challenging or even unsafe for some to enter into conversations about these topics with those who think differently, with our imagined ‘others’? These questions are particularly relevant in a European context, where internal diversity is often overlooked or underestimated, and in relation to LGBTQ+ matters, are emotionally, politically, and theologically charged.

Rather than highlighting the importance of reaching a mutual understanding or developing what a potential consensus could entail (outcome), this chapter focuses on the conversations themselves and the conditions that shape them (pre-conditions and process). Drawing on autoethnographic reflections on imperfect attempts at such conversations and on Amy Edmondson’s theory of psychological safety, I argue that the power imbalances and institutional habits that currently shape conversations about LGBTQ+ matters in the Catholic Church undermine the very conditions required for dialogue across difference or, in Edmondson’s words, for learning from “the other”.⁴

In what follows, I will first situate the research question and approach by explaining the context from which I speak, how I understand plurality and “the other” in this particular context, and autoethnography as a methodological approach. Second, I will present two vignettes describing my experiences of participating in conversations about LGBTQ+ matters in the Catholic Church in Belgium. Third, drawing on Edmondson’s theory of psychological safety and conceptualisation of learning, I reflect on what these experiences reveal about the conditions that enable or hinder dialogue across difference in plural, sometimes even polarised, ecclesial settings.

² Allen, “In Crux interview, Pope stresses welcome of LGBTQ Catholics, won’t change teaching.”

³ Ibid.

See also: Clements, “Social and Political Context,” 371; Desmet, “Abortus, euthanasie, homo-huwelijk,” 145-146.

⁴ Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization*.

Situating the research question and approach

Plurality and LGBTQ+ in the (Belgian) Catholic Church

In contemporary Catholicism, questions related to gender and sexuality have emerged as a pressing topic.⁵ This is evidenced not only by the growing interest among (Catholic) theologians and scholars of religious studies in the intersection between LGBTQ+ matters and Catholicism/Catholic identity,⁶ but also by the ways in which LGBTQ+ believers are increasingly claiming space in the Catholic Church, and others are in turn making space for them. The pilgrimage for LGBTQ+ Catholics, which took place in September 2025 in light of the Jubilee, clearly illustrates the growing visibility of this group of believers and their experiences.⁷ Questions related to gender and sexuality have also been addressed at the institutional level, as evidenced by the several magisterial documents issued over the last ten years on same-sex relationships and/or gender theory. The 2021 *Responsum ad dubium* and accompanying explanatory note,⁸ and the 2023 declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* are arguably the most (in)famous examples.⁹

This chapter is written from the Belgian context, where questions about the inclusion of LGBTQ+ believers have become particularly urgent and seemingly unavoidable. Flanders, the Northern part of Belgium where Dutch is the official language, has around 6.8 million inhabitants, roughly half of whom identify as Catholic.¹⁰ Despite its relatively small size, the Flemish Church is well known among Catholics in Europe and beyond because of the recent support that the Flemish bishops have shown for LGBTQ+ believers. While there were earlier moments – such as the strong opposition of Antwerp bishop Johan Bonny to the 2021 *Responsum*¹¹ – the most significant international attention for publicly challenging Rome came in the fall of 2022, when the bishops published a document formalising pastoral care for gay people and same-sex couples, titled “Being Pastorally Close to Gay People: For a Welcoming Church that Excludes No one.”

⁵ It is important to note that young people played an important role in identifying this topic as urgent. The acronym ‘LGBT’ first appeared in a magisterial document in the spring of 2018, in the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Synod on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment, which took place in October of that year.

⁶ See, for example: Ruiz, “Synodality in the Catholic Church”; Steidl Jack, *LGBTQ Catholic Ministry*; Massingale, “The Twilight of Dissent”; Ballano, *LGBTQI Inclusivity, Homosexuality and Same-sex Marriage in the Catholic Church*; Mayrhofer, “Croire et appartenir”; Ballano, *Gender Ideology and the Contemporary Catholic Church*.

⁷ See Millesimi, “I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me.”

⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Responsum of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a *dubium* regarding the blessing of the unions of persons of the same sex”; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Article of Commentary on the *Responsum ad dubium*.”

⁹ Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans*.”

¹⁰ Bisschoppen van België, *De Katholieke Kerk 2023*, 46.

¹¹ Bonny, “Ik voel plaatsvervangende schaamte voor mijn Kerk.”

Most notably, this document proposed a liturgy for celebrating same-sex relationships.¹²

These developments can create the impression that a “liberal” or “progressive” consensus has emerged in the Belgian Catholic Church. However, it is important to point out that, although the relatively open stance of the Flemish bishops has gained significant international visibility, it does not extend uniformly across all Belgian believers. This became clear, for example, in January of 2025 when the Flemish Catholic youth group *Kamino* announced on Instagram that they would participate in Brussels Pride for the first time. The announcement prompted dozens of critical responses from young believers, citing official Church teaching to justify their concerns. An earlier example concerns the open letter signed by a group of young, primarily French-speaking Catholics in response to the 2022 synthesis of the local consultation phase of the Synod. In this letter, the young believers expressed their view that their lived experience and lived faith were not reflected by the rather progressive Belgian synthesis.¹³ These examples highlight the tension that remains hidden and is to some extent even concealed in the Belgian Catholic Church.

As explained in the introduction and as evidenced by the above description, the contemporary Catholic Church is confronted with increasing plurality regarding these pressing topics. Believers, theologians, and Church leaders in Europe and beyond relate to the Church’s official teachings on gender and sexuality in different ways. Empirical research supports this observation¹⁴ and has lead Linda Woodhead to conclude that, at least in some parts of the world, “faithful Catholics are an endangered species,” suggesting not a decline in the number of Catholics who identify as such, but rather an increase in the number of Catholics who uphold theological and moral positions and/or engage in practices that are not fully in accordance with or even oppose Church teaching.¹⁵ Importantly, and as Woodhead’s quote clearly hints at, plurality in this context is not only a matter of a coexistence of different perspectives and attitudes but of competing understandings of and claims about what it means to be faithfully Catholic.

Norm and other in the (Flemish) Catholic Church

Although diversity in perspectives and attitudes among Catholics is hardly new, it has only recently been recognised as a part of the Church’s institutional reality rather than as a problem or deviation on the part of the individual believers or theologians who uphold these alternative positions. According to Bryan Massingale, the pontificate of Pope Francis has played an important role in this regard.

¹² Flemish Bishops, “Being Pastorally Close to Gay People.”

¹³ “OPINION: Lettre ouverte aux chrétiens de Belgique cosignée par 200 jeunes.”

¹⁴ Clague, “Catholics, Families, and the Synod of Bishops.” See also Dillen et al, “Over hete hangijzers.”

¹⁵ Woodhead, “Poll: Faithful Catholics are an endangered species.”

Massingale argues that the late pope had not only encouraged honest discussions among all the faithful about all kinds of sensitive topics, but had also stimulated “a shifting of alternate proposals on sexual morality out of the category of ‘dissent’”.¹⁶ Massingale explains: “It is now obvious that ‘dissenting’ opinions are no longer confined to ‘disloyal’ or ‘unorthodox’ theologians. Rather, so-called dissenting opinions are now found even among the official teachers (e.g., the Church’s bishops).”¹⁷ In other words, positions and practices that previously existed at the margins have moved closer to the centre of ecclesial life. The Flemish case should be understood in light of this broader shift regarding the norm/normative: theological and moral positions that would previously be labelled as deviant are now considered “probable” and have acquired a certain normative weight.

Developments regarding what is considered the norm in relation to a particular context or theme also imply a shift regarding what or who is considered “other” to that norm. In this chapter, I understand “the other” not as an outsider of the Catholic Church but rather in terms of the relational process of “othering” through which some (them) are imagined or constructed as radically different from an assumed norm (us) within the same Catholic setting. Because what counts as normative is not fixed, processes of othering are not absolute or static either. They are shaped by which interpretations of which sources are prioritised, and by whose voices and experiences are recognised as authoritative. In other words, who becomes “them” depends on who defines “us” and on what grounds. Social and symbolic markers such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity and ecclesial status play an important role in othering processes.¹⁸

When it comes to LGBTQ+ matters and the Catholic Church, LGBTQ+ persons and their allies have been and continue to be positioned as “other” on the basis of official magisterial teaching.¹⁹ As explained earlier, the Belgian context illustrates and complicates these dynamics. The reactions to the Flemish Catholic youth group’s participation in Brussels Pride demonstrate how a particular interpretation of natural law and Biblical passages continues to serve as a normative reference point for determining what “real” Catholics are allowed to support or participate in. At the same time, the very fact that a Catholic organisation publicly announces not only its support for but participation in a Pride event suggests a shift in what is considered acceptable within the Belgian Catholic Church.

The picture becomes even more complex when local dynamics are considered alongside broader narratives about inclusion and exclusion. When it comes to

¹⁶ Massingale, “The Twilight of Dissent,” 149.

¹⁷ Ibid., 149.

¹⁸ Auga, “Gender Studies,” 622. See also: Isherwood and Harris, *Radical Otherness*.

¹⁹ For a detailed exploration of Catholic Church teaching on homosexuality and same-sex relationships, see Willaert, “De lange weg naar *Fiducia Supplicans*.”

LGBTQ+ inclusion in the Catholic Church, public discourse often assumes a simple geographical binary: the so-called “liberal West” is set against the so-called “traditional Global South”.²⁰ Often included in this geographical us versus them binary are Catholics with a migration background and, importantly, the so-called “foreign priests”, i.e. the growing group of non-native priests, primarily but not exclusively from the Global South, serving in parishes in Europe and the United States due to the lack of local priestly vocations.²¹ Otheo, the Flemish Catholic news site, reported in 2023 that “there are sometimes tensions between rather conservative foreign priests and Flemish lay collaborators on the liturgy or pastoral decision making. The same applies to moral views: when it comes to marriage, sexuality or bioethical issues, many Flemish opinions are far from obvious to African or Asian priests, for example.”²² When LGBTQ+ inclusion is presented as a moral baseline in a given context, albeit inclusion in homonormative terms of conditional belonging, “conservative” voices, both “here” and “there,” may get categorised as “other” by a “progressive” “us”, thus subverting traditional assumptions about who belongs and who does not.

Autoethnography

As announced in the introduction, this chapter centres autoethnographic accounts of my own experiences as a researcher working on the intersection of LGBTQ+ matters and the Catholic Church. Autoethnography is described by Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur Bochner as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*).”²³ They further suggest that autoethnography is “more than a methodological approach,”²⁴ arguing that it is “not simply a way of knowing about the world, it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally and reflexively.”²⁵ In other words, it is a way of reflecting and writing in which the boundaries between the personal and the cultural are intentionally blurred, as the researcher’s lived experiences become the starting point of reflection.²⁶

Autoethnography should not be understood merely as a tool to give research a personal touch or to check a positionality box. Rather, it offers a more integrated and reflexive way of accounting for positionality, moving, in Louise Folkes’

²⁰ The Economist, “Catholics Are More Liberal”; Brockmans, “Westerse gelovigen zijn progressiever.”

²¹ Gabriel et al., *Die Situation ausländischer Priester*; Wijzen, “Foreign Priests”; Join-Lambert, “Les prêtres venus d’ailleurs”; Derroitte, “Actrices et acteurs d’origines diverses.” See also Bisschoppen van België, *De Kerk in België 2025*, 62. In Belgium about 22% of all “ministers of worship” are not Belgian citizens.

²² Otheo, “IPB-Forum over de internationalisering.”

²³ Ellis et al., “Autoethnography,” 273.

²⁴ Ellis, “Preface,” 10, quoted in Sikes, “Section Introduction,” 23.

²⁵ Ibid., 23.

²⁶ Walton, *Writing Methods*, 3–4.

words, beyond a “shopping list” of aspects of social identity.²⁷ It provides researchers with a sense of agency, as Pat Sikes argues, as it “enables people to speak from themselves rather than through intermediaries.”²⁸ Heather Walton and Nella van den Brandt further emphasise the political potential of an autoethnographic approach. They argue that it can challenge dominant assumptions about what constitutes real research, what counts as valid data, and whose voices are recognised as authoritative.²⁹ Van den Brandt points in particular to its “socio-politically productive” character. She writes:

“Autoethnography is moreover socio-politically productive because it enables the construction and expression of solidarity with others who similarly write critically, partially, and honestly about what it means to be an academic researcher emerging from a specific background or tradition, having a commitment to particular research themes as well as social justice, and claiming an intellectual voice as, for instance, feminist, queer, postcolonial, Black, Indigenous and/or Jewish, Christian, or Muslim scholars.”³⁰

Autoethnographic vignettes

“I did not choose to be gay”

In January 2025, I was invited to participate in and give a presentation during a gathering on the topic of “Catholic Church and LGBTQ+” for the priests of a particular Belgian diocese. I accepted the invitation because I considered it a significant and hopeful development that a diocese would organise a session on this topic for its priests and invite someone like me, someone who is openly queer, to participate and take the lead. This invitation signalled to me that LGBTQ+ inclusion was recognised as an important and urgent topic, and that the lived experiences of those involved were, at last, put at the centre.

While the session was open to all priests of the diocese, it was mandatory only for the so-called foreign priests (in Dutch: “buitenlandse priesters”), suggesting that this group of priests in particular could benefit from information and education on this topic, whereas others could consider it optional. When I accepted the invitation, I was neither unaware nor untouched by the assumptions and stereo-

²⁷ Folkes, “Moving Beyond ‘Shopping List’ Positionality”; Huygens and Gruber, “Dis/closures of Positionality.”

²⁸ Sikes, “Section Introduction,” 25.

²⁹ Walton, *Writing Methods*, 7–9.

³⁰ van den Brandt, “Leaving ... What Exactly?,” 28. See also: Massoud, “The Price of Positionality,” S64. Massoud similarly writes: [S]elf-disclosure puts scholars in a vulnerable position, and those most likely to reveal how their positionality shapes their research are women, ethnic minorities, or both. At this stage of the field’s methodological development, the burdens of positionality are being carried unevenly by a tiny minority of researchers.”

types surrounding this group of priests. During my theology studies at KU Leuven, some of my classmates were priests from elsewhere, and I had witnessed some of them becoming visibly uncomfortable when I mentioned my research interests or personal life. Like many Flemish Catholics, I had also heard sensational stories about parishes falling apart as soon as a priest from elsewhere was appointed. Most importantly, I had encountered in the context of my research studies documenting the cross-cultural challenges incoming priests face when adapting to the relatively liberal socio-cultural climate of Northern and Western Europe.³¹ For example, Claire Watkins, when describing the UK context, emphasises incoming priests' different expectations or even "problematic approaches to ecumenism, marriage, gender and sexuality."³²

That day of the presentation, I felt extremely nervous. I wanted to perform well, to make a good impression on the bishop and participating priests, and, above all, to ensure that everyone would feel comfortable enough to speak freely about the topic at hand. I decided to present myself only as a researcher, not as a personal witness, to maintain some control over how I would be perceived, and to avoid putting the audience in a position where they felt uncomfortable or unable to speak up for fear of offending me. When I arrived at the session, the pressure quickly diminished. The diocesan representative I had been in contact with was apparently occupied with supervising language tests, and the bishop, whose support and presence had signalled the importance of the gathering, had cancelled at the last minute. One of the more senior priests, Father David (pseudonym), took responsibility for the session instead. He showed me where to sit and where to find coffee. Most importantly, he reminded me that the entire session was to be held in Dutch. Although this had been communicated beforehand, it was now becoming clear that many of the participants were still learning the language and were more comfortable speaking English or French. I voiced my concern to Father David, but the language was apparently non-negotiable.

The language requirement had a profound impact on my presentation. The priests listened politely. They occasionally smiled or nodded, I believe, to acknowledge my efforts rather than the content of my presentation. While some were taking notes, others were looking at the door where the language tests were taking place. After my talk, Father David suggested that the priests discuss it in small groups, suggesting and assuming that the topic was too sensitive to address in a plenary setting. When the group reconvened, one Indian priest volunteered to summarise his group's reflections. Choosing his words carefully and struggling with Dutch grammar and specific terminology, he confessed that he would hesitate to give a same-sex couple a liturgical blessing. He explained that the magisterium opposes

³¹ Desloovere, "Conflict tussen priester en pastoraal coördinator."

³² Watkins, "Les défis des inculturations, de la mission inversée et des communautés," 425.

same-sex relationships and that priests should not mislead or confuse their parishioners on this point. As he spoke, I noticed a Flemish priest growing visibly uncomfortable. His face flushed as he tapped his foot under the table. Before the Indian priest could finish, the Flemish priest interrupted him from across the room. "I did not choose to be gay!" he cried out (Dutch: "Ik heb er niet voor gekozen om homo te zijn!").

A heavy silence followed. It was no longer clear who could or should speak now, in what way, or at what cost. The Indian priest, not fully understanding what had been said, looked at Father David and me for help. Others appeared visibly uncomfortable as well, either because they understood what was happening and wanted to move on or because they did not. Eventually, Father David stepped forward. Without acknowledging what had just happened, he brought the session to a close. A polite applause followed that signalled relief more than appreciation.

"Never in my life have I heard of gay goats in Kenya"

In the summer of 2025, I attended an international conference on global Catholicism organised by various international partners in Belgium. As soon as I learned this conference had opened a call for papers for young researchers, I eagerly submitted an abstract. It felt like the ideal opportunity for me to connect with researchers in the field and to address my research topic, Catholic identity and LGBTQ+, in a complex and multivocal way, beyond the familiar Flemish claim that "being gay in the Church is not really an issue anymore."

Despite its stated focus on dialogue, the conference website and schedule immediately revealed clear hierarchical boundaries established between groups of participants based on their clerical status and/or academic seniority. Keynote lectures were reserved exclusively for bishops. Doctoral researchers were grouped in parallel sessions and were not included in the paper presentation schedule, unlike the senior scholars. The distinction would be made visible at the conference by colour-coded name tags: red for bishops, green for professors and yellow for doctoral researchers.

It therefore came as no surprise, although still as a disappointment, that something felt "off" almost immediately upon arrival. Within minutes of parking the car, my colleagues and I were informed that all young researchers were expected to assist the organisational team with practical tasks. What initially appeared to be minor support quickly developed into more demanding responsibilities, including live interpretation from French to English for a group of bishops and professors. These requests were difficult to refuse, because we had not yet presented our own work and because of the presence of cardinals, bishops and scholars we looked up to. Access to informal spaces was also unevenly distributed. Doctoral researchers were not included in the communal lunches and dinners where the bishops and senior researchers gathered and were accommodated separately from the

main venue. Already before the conference had properly started, our role had shifted from that of conversation partners to that of facilitators.

Most of the yellow-tag participants left right after their presentations on the second day for the reasons mentioned above. I decided to stay, partly because I did not want to leave my colleague behind who was unable to change his flight, and most importantly, because the presentation I was most looking forward to was scheduled for the final day. A professor was set to speak about *Fiducia Supplicans*, the recent declaration by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith about the blessing of same-sex couples, from an African perspective. While other speakers had briefly referred to LGBTQ+ matters, mostly in a negative or dismissive way, this would be the first time the issue was addressed explicitly.

The presentation largely consisted of a summary of the official responses of various episcopal conferences, repeating the familiar argument that homosexuality is not an African concern but rather a Western import. Unsurprisingly, the professor concluded that the document had little relevance and should not be taken too seriously. During the Q&A, it initially seemed that no one would challenge his argument. I found that both confusing and disappointing, yet I hesitated to speak up myself, although I was probably among the most familiar with the topic in the room.

Just as the session was about to end, a doctoral researcher I had shared a panel with a couple of days before raised his hand. This was one of the few moments during the conference when a yellow-tag participant was actually given the floor. He challenged the professor's repeated claim that homosexuality is unnatural or absent from the African continent. Rather than appealing to complex theological arguments, as the bishop had done, he spoke from lived experience. I was happily surprised, as this perspective had not only been missing from the professor's presentation, but from the conference in general. The researcher recalled a visit to Kenya, where he had once seen what he called "two gay goats." The audience laughed, but he continued calmly and confidently. Acknowledging that the behaviour of goats is not a typical starting point for theological or anthropological reflection, he nevertheless asked: Why does the Church insist that homosexuality is unnatural when it clearly occurs in nature? And why do some Church leaders in Africa claim it is absent from the continent when it evidently exists, if not widely among humans, then at least among animals?

Before the professor could even respond, a bishop in the audience took the floor and shouted: "Never in my life have I heard of gay goats in Kenya!" The room responded with laughter, and the chair smoothly moved on to the next question without addressing the point raised. The exchange probably lasted no longer than a minute, but it was symptomatic of how the young researchers had felt through-

out the conference. The young researcher's attempt to bring an alternative perspective into the conversation was not only dismissed but also publicly ridiculed by someone in power.

Conditions that shape 'learning' from 'the other'

As stated in this introduction, this chapter examines conversations about LGBTQ+ matters in the Catholic Church and aims to understand *why* these often produce tension, confusion, or polarisation. The cases described above are clear examples of this. The diocesan session ended in a moment of heightened tension that had, most likely, a lasting impact on both the Indian and Flemish priest. At the conference, the bishops' dismissive response left the young researcher humiliated and the normative claim he attempted to question untouched. This recurring pattern cannot be explained by the attitude or communicative competence of the individuals involved alone, but suggests that certain structural factors and decisions may play a role in how these conversations unfold in practice.

Edmondson's theory of psychological safety

The above observation brings me to the work of Amy Edmondson, who argues that the success and flourishing of an organisation and the people in it are dependent not on the individuals in that organisation but on the conditions that shape their interaction.³³ Edmondson points to two dimensions in particular: psychological safety and performance standards. Both are essentially two sides of the same coin, as "psychological safety is conducive to setting ambitious goals and working toward them together."³⁴ Central to this framework is Edmondson's conceptualisation of psychological safety:

"Working in a psychologically safe environment does not mean that people always agree with one another for the sake of being nice. It also does not mean that people offer unequivocal praise or unconditional support for everything you have to say. In fact, you could say it's the opposite. Psychological safety is about candor, about making it possible for productive disagreement and free exchange of ideas. It goes without saying that these are vital to learning and innovation. Conflict inevitably arises in any workplace. Psychological safety enables people on different sides of a conflict to speak candidly about what's bothering them."³⁵

If both dimensions are high, a *learning zone* can emerge, which Edmondson describes as a context where "people can collaborate, learn from each other, and get complex, innovative work done." When both dimensions are low, individuals find themselves in the *apathy zone*. Given the low stakes and low psychological

³³ Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15–16.

safety, they disengage and focus primarily on self-protection. When safety is high, but standards are low, a *comfort zone* emerges. Individuals feel safe and valued, but not challenged to do better. High standards but low safety create an *anxiety zone* where fear prevents open communication.³⁶

Although Edmondson developed her framework with organisational life in mind, it offers a useful language to understand what makes it challenging to enter into conversations about contested topics in the Catholic Church. While the Catholic Church cannot be equated with a corporation and the relationships between believers cannot be reduced to professional interactions, the two contexts are similar in that they are both hierarchically structured and dependent on a shared, normative vision. All members are expected to work towards that shared purpose, even if this sometimes conflicts with their personal convictions, ideas, or interests. Importantly, Edmondson's understanding of psychological safety resonates strongly with Pope Francis's understanding and encouragement of *parrhesia* or "bold and forthright discourse in the Church and even among the bishops."³⁷ As Mary Kate Holman observes, Francis's emphasis on "frankness, courage, [and] boldness"³⁸ stands in stark contrast with the "don't ask, don't tell"³⁹ policy the Catholic Church has been frequently accused of, particularly with regard to "clerical celibacy and sexual orientation, and [...] the insidious cover-up of sexual abuse."⁴⁰

A preference for harmony and a mix of implicit and explicit power imbalances

With a better understanding of what dimensions might play a role in stimulating dialogue and learning, I return to the vignettes to try and identify what exactly went "wrong" in these interactions. Looking back, it is clear that high psychological safety and high performance standards did not coexist in the above experiences. At the diocesan gathering, it was the low performance standards that stood out, whereas at the conference, it was the low level of psychological safety. The stakes initially appeared high for the diocesan study day: the bishop was scheduled to be present, and attendance was mandatory for certain priests. However, the absence of the key figures immediately undermined my sense of high performance standards. The most important reason that the session started to feel like a formality was that the broader aim of learning about and engaging about the topic of LGBTQ+ was explicitly and intentionally made secondary to the practical purpose of language training for foreign priests. At the conference, psychological safety was impacted negatively by the boundaries that were intentionally and visibly established between participants. The boundary-making was established on the basis of ecclesial or academic authority, or a combination of the two, and

³⁶ Ibid., 18–19.

³⁷ Massingale, "The Twilight of Dissent," 149.

³⁸ Holman, "Parrhesia as Ancient and New," 538.

³⁹ Ibid., 539.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 539.

occurred through seemingly insignificant interventions: asking young researchers to help with the digital setup, providing them with different coloured name tags, and asking them to arrange their own lunches and dinners. The negative response to the “gay goats remark” served as a reminder of the types of opinions that were permitted at this event and who was allowed to voice them.

The question that inevitably arises here is whether the absence of high performance standards and/or psychological safety in these two instances was incidental or rather characteristic for the way which conversations about contested topics typically unfold in the Catholic Church. I suggest that the absence of learning is not accidental, but emerges as a perhaps unintended but difficult to avoid consequence of the Catholic Church’s tendency to prioritise harmony and of the almost unavoidable mix of implicit and explicit power imbalances in the ecclesial context.

Across both events, conversation leaders treated disagreement as something to be avoided rather than engaged. At the diocesan event, an uncomfortable interruption marked the end of the session, and during the conference, potentially challenging questions from the audience were strategically dismissed. While these reactions may, to some extent, have reflected the personalities of those in charge, they also make sense in light of the Catholic Church’s institutional tendency to prioritise harmony and avoid (visible) conflict. As Judith Gruber, Michael Schüßler, and Ryszard Bobrowicz write: “Theological ideals and historical narratives of unity, rather than conflict, typically remain the organizing principle in a theological interpretation of contestation in the church.”⁴¹ The prominence of the language of harmony in the synodal documents illustrates how deeply this emphasis is embedded in ecclesial life and Catholic theology.⁴²

From the perspective of Edmondson’s framework, however, such a focus on harmony risks undermining rather than enabling learning.⁴³ Tension and friction are unavoidable, Edmondson argues, and should therefore be engaged rather than suppressed. For this to happen and for so-called “productive disagreement”⁴⁴ to emerge in conversations about contested topics such as LGBTQ+, it must be carefully navigated. This is first and foremost the responsibility of those who organise and facilitate such conversations. If harmony no longer serves as their guiding principle, they must find a way to cultivate conditions that allow disagreement to be expressed without escalating into harmful or painful interactions. The vignettes presented above illustrate what happens when this responsibility is not

⁴¹ Gruber, Schüßler, and Bobrowicz, “Introduction,” 4.

⁴² See, for example Pope Francis, *For a Synodal Church*. In this document, the term “harmony” features 29 times.

⁴³ Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

taken up and demonstrate that particularly on this front there is still work to be done.

Implicit and explicit power imbalances also shaped who could speak, what could be said and how discomfort was distributed across both events. At the diocesan gathering, unspoken assumptions about the conversation partners and about the purpose of the session undermined its potential to become a learning opportunity. Many of the participants entered the room marked by assumptions about their stance on LGBTQ+ inclusion and were put at a disadvantage because they were obligated to speak in a language they did not master. At the conference, the bishops and (male) professors invited to give presentations had a significant impact on which topics were up for debate and in what way, while the young researchers had to work to earn their place and were at risk of being publicly disciplined if they challenged established ideas or scholars.

Once more, while the organisers bear some responsibility for creating or, at the very least, not preventing an unsafe space, these instances are symptomatic of the way in which authority and credibility are distributed in the Catholic Church. The fact that not everyone enters the ecclesial or theological conversation table on equal footing is hardly surprising. Richard R. Gaillardetz gives a blunt but familiar example: “In the Church in the United States, a wealthy, white lay male is more likely to have his faith witness taken seriously by those in leadership than a poor Latina whose immigration status may be in question.”⁴⁵ At the conference in particular, ecclesial and academic hierarchies produced comfort for those already in power and reinforced the vulnerable position of others.

From the perspective of Edmondson, such asymmetries undermine the possibility of psychological safety and, with it, of learning. The risks of contributing openly and critically are simply too high. Indeed, in the context of the Catholic Church, belonging and identity are on the line. This became painfully clear when the Flemish priest felt his very existence was under threat and decided to put forward his identity as an argument. Gaillardetz reminds us that power itself is not the problem, as “any form of authentic human existence will require the exercise of power in relation to others.”⁴⁶ Too often, however, it is assumed that existing power imbalances persist because of a lack of awareness of their destructive potential, and that increasing such awareness will enable their transformation into more empowering forms. My own experiences challenge this assumption. It is difficult to maintain that, at the conference for example, the unequal treatment of some people and ideas their effects were simply unnoticed. This implies that the task at hand is not merely to generate greater awareness, but to ask why and how such dynamics continue to be sustained.

⁴⁵ Gaillardetz, “Power and Authority in the Church,” 95.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

Concluding remarks

I began this chapter by referring to a recent observation by Pope Leo XIV,⁴⁷ suggesting that increasing plurality within the Catholic Church goes hand in hand with an increasing difficulty or even inability to enter into constructive conversation with each other about so-called sensitive topics. Such an observation risks presenting polarisation as almost inevitable in this context, and leaves little room to question whether it is in fact a “normal” feature of conversations about contested topics of plurality itself, or whether it can be explained by the conditions under which these conversations take place.

By foregrounding these very conditions, this chapter aimed to contribute to the broader aim of this volume, which is to foreground the perspectives of young researchers on pressing theological questions for contemporary European Catholicism. I hope it has become clear throughout this chapter that more is at stake than merely a communication issue and that the fact that speaking with one another about contested issues is, or has become, a challenge points to a fundamentally ecclesiological problem. Indeed, Francis’s efforts towards “an integral synodalisation of the Church”⁴⁸ and a “new ecclesial lifestyle [...] characterized by words like conversation, openness, journeying, and the Holy Spirit”⁴⁹ have reminded us that listening to and speaking with one another are not optional, but integral dimensions of ecclesial life. If this vision of the Church is to be taken seriously, the way we speak or do not speak to one another reflects how we are and become Church.

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⁴⁷ Allen, “In Crux interview, Pope stresses welcome of LGBTQ Catholics, won’t change teaching.”

⁴⁸ Borrás, “La synodalité ecclésiale,” 277.

⁴⁹ Moons, “A Comprehensive Introduction to Synodality,” 74.

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PART III: YOUNG CATHOLICS IN EUROPE BETWEEN HERITAGE AND CREATIVITY

COMMITMENT TO A THREATENED EUROPE: ROMANO GUARDINI'S AND STEFAN ZWEIG'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES IN EUROPE

Jonas Klur

Abstract

This paper examines the ideas of Romano Guardini and Stefan Zweig regarding the cultural and spiritual foundations of Europe and their relevance to contemporary challenges. Despite significant differences in background and outlook—a Catholic theologian and a Jewish writer—both thinkers shared a profound commitment to the European project, understood primarily as a spiritual and cultural unity rather than a purely political or economic construct. Their biographies shaped this perspective.

Both authors experienced the catastrophic consequences of nationalism and war in the twentieth century, and perceived Europe as deeply threatened. Zweig interpreted Europe as a “spiritual organism” and sought unity through a shared cultural consciousness, drawing symbolically on the biblical narrative of the Tower of Babel as an image of humanity’s longing for unity. Guardini, in contrast, located Europe’s deeper origin in the person of Jesus Christ and in the Christian understanding of the human person and freedom.

A central theme in both thinkers is the responsible use of power in modern technological societies. Guardini stresses Europe’s task as a “critique of power,” warning against its destructive potential when detached from moral responsibility. Both authors also highlight the dangers posed by propaganda, untruth, and manipulative language, emphasizing the importance of truthfulness and respectful dialogue for sustaining social cohesion and democracy.

Finally, the paper argues that Europe’s future depends on renewing its spiritual foundations while preserving the diversity of its nations. In a secular and pluralistic context, the values of human dignity and freedom—historically shaped by Christianity—may still serve as common ground. Through education, intercultural exchange, and responsible public discourse, Europe can rediscover its inner cohesion and respond constructively to contemporary threats. Christianity must assume its responsibility.

Biographical ties to Europe

Despite all their differences, the Catholic philosopher of religion, theologian, and educator Romano Guardini (1885–1968) and the world-renowned Jewish writer Stefan Zweig (1881–1942) were united by an existential and intellectual commitment to the European project. This shared conviction also found expression in their active advocacy on its behalf. For both Romano Guardini and Stefan Zweig, Europe was above all a spiritual and cultural unity, prior to any political or economic considerations. In both cases, their commitment to this vision was profoundly grounded in their respective biographies. Guardini was the son of Italian parents, born in Verona, but moved to Mainz during his first year of life and later, as a young priest, became a German citizen. He was able to reconcile this step mentally, which had met with unease in his family¹, through the idea of Europe as a bond between Italy and Germany, since he wished to remain faithful to his country of origin while also embracing the country that had become his second homeland. In his autobiographical notes on the reality of Europe, he writes:

“I recognised it as the basis on which alone I could exist: inwardly oriented towards the German essence, yet faithfully holding fast to my first homeland; and both not as a mere coexistence, but as one reality, ‘Europe’, which is born not only of historical necessities, but also of the lives of those who experience it in their own existence.”²

Stefan Zweig likewise had a familial connection to Italy, albeit not as close as Guardini’s. His mother was born in Ancona, while his father came from Moravia. Relatives lived, among other places, in France and Switzerland. Zweig himself grew up in Vienna. In this respect alone, a European existence was placed in his cradle.³

His belonging to Judaism also enabled him to look beyond individual nations and to think and feel internationally.⁴ Jews are, after all, a people dispersed throughout the world.⁵ This already indicates that, ultimately, Zweig did not confine his perspective solely to Europe. He regarded himself more as a citizen of the world,

¹ Guardini, *Stationen und Rückblicke - Berichte über mein Leben*, 92.

² “Ich erkannte es als die Basis, auf der ich allein existieren könne: hineingewandt in das deutsche Wesen, aber in Treue festhaltend die erste Heimat; und beides nicht als bloßes Nebeneinander, sondern eins in der Realität »Europa«, die wohl aus geschichtlichen Notwendigkeiten, aber auch aus dem Leben derer geboren wird, die sie im eigenen Leben erfahren.” Ibid., 296 [own translation].

³ Le Rider, “Europa-Konzeptionen,” 748f.

⁴ Plank, “»Ich empfinde dankbar, daß es das Judentum ist, das mir diese übernationale Freiheit ermöglicht hat.« Stefan Zweigs jüdische Identität als Grundlage seiner Internationalität,” 275–81.

⁵ The relevant legend in Stefan Zweig, *Der Begrabene Leuchter*. [I owe this reference to Jens Van Rompaey].

as an internationalist sustained by an unshakeable “belief in the inner spiritual unity of our world” and who regarded “the brotherhood of the spirit as self-evident”⁶, rather than as a supporter of a “harmless, non-committal banquet-Europeanism”.⁷ Zweig’s Jewish identity was not primarily religious in nature.⁸ Nevertheless, his Jewishness meant that he suffered greatly from the Nazi seizure of power and from the annexation of Austria to the German Reich in 1938.

Guardini was forced into inner exile from 1939 onwards—his chair in Berlin was dissolved—so that he spent much of his time in seclusion with his friend Josef Weiger in the rectory in Mooshausen, in the South of Germany.⁹ Yet he undoubtedly found his situation easier than Zweig’s. Stefan Zweig fled Salzburg in time and, after several intermediate stops in exile, eventually made his way to Brazil, more precisely to Petrópolis.¹⁰ The First World War had already profoundly shaken him, as Europe failed to achieve unity and instead disintegrated in war. He lost the last remnants of his confidence with the outbreak of the Second World War. In his personal retrospective in *The World of Yesterday*, he notes: “Europe, the homeland of my heart’s choice, is lost to me, since it has torn itself suicidally apart for the second time in a war of brother against brother.”¹¹ Guardini, too, shortly after the Second World War, emphasised the disastrous condition of Europe, although it affected him less deeply than it did the Austrian writer – who committed suicide – as he was able to preserve a sense of hope as a man of faith:

“We know—and will be forced to know ever more harshly—how terribly Europe has raged against itself and how deeply it has betrayed its own spirit. Everywhere cities are destroyed and languages debased, and what has happened to the living soul is still impossible to measure.”¹²

The destruction is more than external; it is also spiritual.

⁶ “Glauben an die innere geistige Einheit unserer Welt”; “die Brüderlichkeit des Geistes als selbstverständlich”; Zweig, “Internationalismus oder Kosmopolitismus,” 75 [own translation].

⁷ “des ungefährlichen, unverpflichtenden Banketteuropäertums”; Ibid., 76 [own translation].

⁸ Gelber, “Judentum und jüdische Identität,” 755.

⁹ Gerl-Falkovitz, *Romano Guardini*, 317–23.

¹⁰ Renoldner, “Biografie,” 29–37.

¹¹ Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, XVIII; “[A]uch die eigentliche Heimat, die mein Herz sich erwählt, Europa, ist mir verloren, seit es sich zum zweitenmal selbstmörderisch zerfleischt im Bruderkriege.” Zweig, *Die Welt von Gestern*, 10.

¹² “Wir wissen, und werden es immer härter zu wissen bekommen, wie furchtbar Europa wider sich selbst gewütet und wie tief es seinen eigenen Geist verraten hat. Überall sind Städte zerstört und Sprachen verwildert, und was mit der lebendigen Seele geschehen, ist noch gar nicht zu ermessen.” Guardini, “Der Heilbringer in Mythos, Offenbarung und Politik,” 201 [own translation].

Building a spiritual Europe

In their reflections, Zweig and Guardini focus primarily on the *spiritual* Europe for which they advocated. This had and still has political implications, but that was not their principal concern.

The Tower of Babel as a model for Europe and beyond?

Zweig sees Europe as “a single spiritual organism”¹³ and seeks to promote a European mentality. For the writer, the idea of Europe has its origins in a biblical story he repeatedly refers to, that of the Tower of Babel (cf. Gen 11:1-9), which he describes as a “myth”¹⁴. Guardini offers a profound definition of a myth:

“It is a memory that has become placeless, reminding us that existence can ultimately only be interpreted from a story, from an event: neither from the empiricism of what is immediately apparent, nor from an analysis of what is lawfully given, but from an occurrence.”¹⁵

This accords with what Zweig writes about the legend of the Tower of Babel as a source of memory:

“And perhaps – who knows how many mysterious memories are alive in our blood – perhaps some vague recollection of those primeval times still lives on in our minds, a Platonic memory that humanity was once one, and an urgent, tormenting longing for it to become one again in order to complete the work once begun.”¹⁶

Zweig’s interpretation of the biblical story is highly idiosyncratic. From a biblical point of view, Babel is anything but a role model. Zweig, however, takes it as an ideal image, since it proclaims unity, through which great things can be built and

¹³ “einen einzigen geistigen Organismus”; Zweig, “Die moralische Entgiftung Europas,” 103 [own translation].

¹⁴ “Mythos”; Zweig, “Der Turm zu Babel,” 214 [own translation]. Cf. i.a. “Der Turm zu Babel”; Zweig, “Der europäische Gedanke in seiner historischen Entwicklung,” 117–37; Zweig, “Die geistige Einheit der Welt,” 144–52.

¹⁵ “Er ist eine ortlos gewordene Erinnerung daran, daß das Dasein im Grunde nur aus einer Geschichte, aus einem Begebnis heraus gedeutet werden kann: weder aus der Empirie des unmittelbar Anzutreffenden, noch aus einer Analyse des gesetzhaft Vorgegebenen, sondern aus einem Ereignis.” Guardini, *Der Mensch*, 117 [own translation].

¹⁶ “Und vielleicht – wer weiß, wieviele geheimnisvolle Erinnerungen in unserem Blute lebendig sind – vielleicht lebt noch irgend ein dumpfes Zurückdenken an jene Urzeit in unserm Geist, platonische Erinnerung, daß die Menschheit einstmals eins war, und eine drängende quälende Sehnsucht, daß sie wieder eins werde, um das angefangene Werk zu vollenden”; Zweig, “Der europäische Gedanke in seiner historischen Entwicklung,” 121 [own translation].

achieved, whereas “discord”¹⁷ allows neither understanding, nor tower building, nor common projects.

For Zweig, his reading of the biblical narrative of the Tower of Babel constitutes the decisive interpretative framework not only for Europe but even beyond it. This is problematic in several respects. At first glance, concord and unity appear attractive and are indeed fundamental preconditions for collective achievement. Today, however, diversity is rightly held to be an important value, even though it is diminishing in various ways.¹⁸ This aspect of the richness of diversity is clearly neglected in the biblical story mentioned above.

The story of the Tower of Babel concerns the potential power of humanity. Particularly through the technological achievements of the modern age, humankind has acquired greater power. For both Zweig and Guardini, questions concerning technology and its use are of acute relevance. At times, the Austrian overestimates the positive consequences of the use of technology when he believes it can create a new unity among people.¹⁹ This is a view that he later corrects.²⁰ For both authors, technological inventions have not only reduced cultural diversity, but also given rise to a number of dangers. In his 1962 address on the occasion of receiving the Erasmus Prize, Guardini engages extensively with the theme of power, which has increased in scope through technology. On the one hand, he refers to the atomic bomb, which gives humans the power to destroy the entire world, and on the other hand, to the power that can have a devastating influence on the individual soul, for example through propaganda. Guardini identifies Europe’s central task as a critical engagement with power:

“So, I believe that the least sensational but most essential task assigned to Europe is the *critique of power*. Not negative criticism, neither fearful nor reactionary; but it should be entrusted with concern for humanity, because it experiences power not as a guarantee of certain triumphs, but as a destiny whose outcome is uncertain.”²¹

Collective human projects are not necessarily good, nor are increases in power and freedom immune from misuse; they can inflict extreme harm on both the

¹⁷ “Zwietracht”; Zweig, “Der Turm zu Babel,” 218 [own translation].

¹⁸ Bauer, *Die Vereindeutigung der Welt*, 7–14.

¹⁹ Zweig, “Der europäische Gedanke in seiner historischen Entwicklung,” 134.

²⁰ Zweig, “Die geistige Einheit der Welt,” 151.

²¹ “So glaube ich, die am wenigsten sensationelle, aber am tiefsten ins Wesentliche führende Aufgabe, die Europa zugewiesen ist, sei die Kritik an der Macht. Nicht negative Kritik, weder ängstliche noch reaktionäre; aber ihm sei die Sorge um den Menschen anvertraut, weil es dessen Macht nicht als Gewähr sicherer Triumphe, sondern als Schicksal erlebt, von dem dahinsteht, wohin es führen werde.” Guardini, “Europa - Wirklichkeit und Aufgabe,” 250 [emphasis added, own translation].

world and the human person. This problem, too, is not addressed in the Tower of Babel narrative. Human power requires responsibility and must be exercised within appropriate limits. Technological capabilities increasingly enable surveillance, control, and manipulation—but the question remains whether they ought to be employed. Does freedom not then turn against itself?

Against this backdrop, it is helpful that Guardini introduces other myths in the speech of 1962 in order to interpret and deal with current human challenges on a broader basis. Prometheus – who skilfully seizes power from the gods – is briefly mentioned as a prototype for “the creative possibilities”²² of human action. Icarus, who is also briefly mentioned, represents the overly ambitious and ultimately self-destructive pursuit of height.²³ Despite his father’s warning, Icarus flies too high, too close to the sun, which melts the wax holding his wings together and causes him to crash. Guardini also cites the myth of Atlas to show that people today are burdened by the expanded power that threatens to overwhelm them.²⁴ “Power itself—the exercise of power as such—must be borne inwardly and assumed as a matter of personal responsibility.”²⁵ Guardini poses a critical question about modern man’s endeavours, without mentioning the myth of the Tower of Babel: “Is it right to view humanity under the image of a being that is gradually meant to overtake God?”²⁶

This can also be seen as a critical question for Zweig and his emphasis on the story of the tower’s construction. In Babel, people vainly attempt, on their own initiative, to reach heaven, to climb to divine heights, through their own collective actions. They do so explicitly without God, who then abruptly thwarts their plans. However, this does not mean that God wants purely passive and powerless creatures. Guardini defines human beings from a Judeo-Christian perspective based on the mandate to rule in Genesis 1:26 as follows: “And if we define the essence of human being in accordance with Genesis as the ability to rule over the world (Gen 1:26), then the increase in power means progress towards the fuller self-realisation of human being.”²⁷ One may add that in this respect the human being

²² “die schöpferischen Möglichkeiten” Guardini, “Europa - Wirklichkeit und Aufgabe,” 250 [own translation].

²³ Guardini, “Europa - Wirklichkeit und Aufgabe,” 250.

²⁴ Ibid., 244.

²⁵ “[D]as Mächtigsein selbst, der Machtgebrauch als solcher muß seelisch geleistet, personal verantwortet werden.” Guardini, “Europa - Wirklichkeit und Aufgabe,” 244 [own translation].

²⁶ “Ist es richtig, ihn unter dem Bilde eines Wesens zu sehen, das allmählich Gott einholen soll?” Guardini, “Europa - Wirklichkeit und Aufgabe,” 244 [own translation].

²⁷ “Und wenn wir das Wesen des Menschen in Anlehnung an die Genesis als Fähigkeit zur Herrschaft über die Welt definieren (Gen 1,26), dann bedeutet die Steigerung der Macht ein Fortschreiten zu vollerer Selbstverwirklichung des Menschen.” Guardini, “Europa - Wirklichkeit und Aufgabe,” 243 [own translation].

resembles God. But power, detached from what is right, good and its origin, can become perverted.

The significance of Jesus Christ for the development of Europe?

In a similar yet more profound sense, Guardini conceives of Europe “not as a mere geographical complex, a simple aggregation of peoples, but as a living entelechy, an effective spiritual form.”²⁸ In another passage, he characterizes Europe – much like Zweig – as a “mindset”²⁹. In contrast to Zweig, Guardini locates the “*arché*”³⁰ – the origin and fundamental principle of Europe – not in a particular narrative but in a person: Jesus Christ.³¹ Following the author Novalis (1772–1801), he sees Europe and Christianity as inextricably linked, not only historically, but also in the future. In a striking and, to modern ears, provocative formulation, he writes: “Europe will be Christian, or it will cease to exist altogether.”³² For Guardini, Christ is not a religious figure that can be arbitrarily replaced. In and through Christian-shaped Europe, the unique significance of the person emerged and gave rise to the “idea of freedom”.³³ The person is to be understood as the counterpart to the mass and the collective. Christ does not simply confirm Greek thought: “His personality gave him [the European, J.K.] the extraordinary ability to live history and experience destiny. [...] Christ lifted him out of his old captivity in nature and the world and placed him in the presence of the personal, holy God, in the freedom of the redeemed.”³⁴

Human beings are not helplessly placed within a cycle of eternal recurrence of the same, as Guardini notes in contrast to Nietzsche. In relation to culture, he defines nature as follows: “»Nature« is that which is there »of itself«; which proceeds from immanent impulses; which continually renews itself from its own fruitfulness.”³⁵ Culture, by contrast, is based on what human beings make of what

²⁸ “[k]ein bloßer geographischer Komplex, keine bloße Gruppe von Völkern, sondern eine lebendige Entelechie, eine wirkende geistige Gestalt.” Guardini, “Der Heilbringer in Mythos, Offenbarung und Politik,” 201 [own translation].

²⁹ “Gesinnung”; Romano Guardini, “Europa - Wirklichkeit und Aufgabe,” 253 [own translation].

³⁰ Guardini, “Der Heilbringer in Mythos, Offenbarung und Politik,” 204.

³¹ Ibid., 203f.

³² “Europa wird christlich, oder es wird überhaupt nicht mehr sein.” Guardini, “Der Heilbringer in Mythos, Offenbarung und Politik,” 201 [own translation].

³³ “Idee der Freiheit”; Guardini, “Europa - Wirklichkeit und Aufgabe,” 251 [own translation]. Cf. Guardini, “Der Heilbringer in Mythos, Offenbarung und Politik,” 186–89.

³⁴ “Seine Persönlichkeit hat ihm [dem Europäer, J.K.] die außerordentliche Fähigkeit gegeben, Geschichte zu leben und Schicksal zu erfahren. [...] Christus hat ihn aus dem alten Eingefangensein in Natur und Welt herausgehoben und ins Gegenüber zum persönlich-heiligen Gott, in die Freiheit des Erlösten gestellt.” Ibid., 203f. [own translation].

³⁵ “»Natur« ist jenes, das »von selbst« da ist; das aus immanenten Antrieben vor sich geht; sich immerfort aus eigener Fruchtbarkeit erneuert.” Guardini, “Europa - Wirklichkeit und Aufgabe,” 244 [own translation].

is given.³⁶ In this freedom, human beings can make something of themselves and of the world entrusted to them—this marks the beginning of history. Through the person of Jesus Christ, humans are placed in a context that transcends the world and nature, receive a new freedom in relation to the immanent, and at the same time are given a great responsibility for the earthly (cf. Gen 1:26).

By contrast, Zweig finds no positive substantive principle that would unite the history of Europe across time. Rather, he emphasises the changing nature of what has served as Europe's binding force: from the Roman Empire, to the Church, later humanism, music, and finally literature.³⁷ For him, the fundamental element is the "sense of community and brotherhood"³⁸ that persists through all substantive changes. And it was not only for him as a European that inner freedom was always important, as he notes at the end of his life in *The World of Yesterday*: "For me, however, personal liberty was the most important thing on earth."³⁹ His conception of freedom differs considerably from Guardini's, which was briefly outlined above. Zweig primarily understood freedom in negative terms—as freedom *from*. In his 1925 essay *Die Monotonisierung der Welt*, he highlights a problematic form of unity: "Everything becomes more uniform in its external forms of life; everything is levelled into a single cultural scheme. The individual customs of peoples are worn away; traditional costumes become uniform; manners become international."⁴⁰ Guardini could concur with this assessment, writing some thirty years later of a similar cultural impoverishment: "The lifestyles of people in different places, clothing, jewellery, manners, entertainment and customs are becoming increasingly similar."⁴¹ Zweig sees the escape from monotony in a retreat into the self:

"Escape, escape into ourselves. One cannot save what is individual in the world; one can only defend the individual within oneself. The highest

³⁶ Guardini, "Europa - Wirklichkeit und Aufgabe," 244.

³⁷ Zweig, "Der europäische Gedanke in seiner historischen Entwicklung"; Zweig, "Die geistige Einheit der Welt."

³⁸ "Gemeinsamkeit und Brüderlichkeit"; Zweig, "Der europäische Gedanke in seiner historischen Entwicklung," 134 [own translation].

³⁹ Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, 389; "Mir aber war die persönliche Freiheit die wichtigste Sache auf Erden." Zweig, *Die Welt von Gestern*, 445.

⁴⁰ "Alles wird gleichförmiger in den äußeren Lebensformen, alles nivelliert sich auf ein einheitliches kulturelles Schema. Die individuellen Gebräuche der Völker schleifen sich ab, die Trachten werden uniform, die Sitten international." Zweig, "Die Monotonisierung der Welt," 64 [own translation].

⁴¹ "Die Lebensgewohnheiten der Menschen an den verschiedensten Orten, Kleidung, Schmuck, Umgangsformen, Vergnügung und Sitte, gleichen sich einander immer mehr an." Guardini, *Ethik*, vol. I, 554 [own translation].

achievement of the spiritual person is always freedom—freedom *from* people, *from* opinions, *from* things; freedom towards oneself. And that is our task: to become ever freer, the more others voluntarily bind themselves.”⁴²

This attitude was also reflected in his way of life. He did not wish to be overly claimed by Judaism, nor to attach himself to one of the many European movements. He liked to travel alone and cherished working quietly by himself. Zweig’s greatest freedom was his independence.⁴³

Unlike Zweig, Guardini emphasises the importance of Christ in various contributions on Europe. In his 1962 speech in Brussels, he is more cautious. Perhaps it was already becoming apparent that the formula “Europe will become Christian, or it will cease to exist”⁴⁴, which he proclaimed shortly after the Second World War, was being met with resistance. The fundamental theologian Christoph Theobald recently wrote the following regarding postulates on the centrality of Christianity for Europe in a secular age: “A more or less clearly articulated argument insisting on the *necessity* of Christianity for the survival of Europe can only provoke new irritation”⁴⁵. Nevertheless, Christ implicitly appears as a benchmark in Guardini’s speech when he suggests how power should be used. In the Gospel, Jesus makes the following statement about himself: “For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) Without explicitly mentioning it, Guardini believes that the correct way to use power is through humble service: “Serving strength that wants things on earth to be right. In this form of exercising power, there is no glamour, no grandeur, but simple objectivity.”⁴⁶ This differs from asserting one’s own interests as the highest principle. Freedom also finds a positive definition here. It is

⁴² “Flucht, Flucht in uns selbst. Man kann nicht das Individuelle in der Welt retten, man kann nur das Individuum verteidigen in sich selbst. Des geistigen Menschen höchste Leistung ist immer Freiheit, Freiheit von den Menschen, von den Meinungen, von den Dingen, Freiheit zu sich selbst. Und das ist unsere Aufgabe: immer freier werden, je mehr sich die anderen freiwillig binden!” Zweig, “Die Monotonisierung der Welt,” 70 [emphasis added, own translation].

⁴³ Plank, “»Ich empfinde dankbar, daß es das Judentum ist, das mir diese übernationale Freiheit ermöglicht hat.« Stefan Zweigs jüdische Identität als Grundlage seiner Internationalität,” 277–79; Le Rider, “Europa als Wille und Vorstellung,” 270–74; Renoldner, “Biografie,” 16.18.31; Le Rider, “Europa-Konzeptionen,” 751f.

⁴⁴ “Europa wird christlich, oder es wird überhaupt nicht mehr sein”. Guardini, “Der Heilbringer in Mythos, Offenbarung und Politik,” 201 [own translation].

⁴⁵ “Eine mehr oder weniger klar ausgesprochene Argumentation, die auf der Notwendigkeit des Christentums für das Überleben Europas besteht, kann nur neue Gereiztheit provozieren”. Theobald, *Christentum als Stil*, 326 [author’s emphasis, own translation].

⁴⁶ “Dienende Stärke, die will, daß die Dinge der Erde recht werden. In dieser Form der Machtübung ist kein Glanz, keine Erhabenheit, sondern schlichte Sachlichkeit.” Guardini, “Europa - Wirklichkeit und Aufgabe,” 252 [own translation].

not about withdrawing into oneself and, if necessary, one's own nation, as is becoming increasingly popular in view of rising nationalist tendencies in various countries, but about transcending oneself and devoting oneself. The highest definition of freedom is not freedom *from*, but freedom *to*. Only in this way can a community of any kind exist and flourish.

In recent years, revelations of spiritual abuse, abuse of power, and sexual abuse within the Catholic Church have emerged in various parts of the world, particularly in Western countries. When these phenomena are examined, the spotlight often falls not only on the direct perpetrators, but also on the structures that have facilitated sexualised violence or the abuse of spiritual authority. In a frightening way, Church structures have sometimes turned out to be systems of untruthfulness and lack of freedom, which have abused people for their own – sometimes perverse – purposes and thereby caused them considerable harm. Some of those in positions of responsibility have placed greater importance on protecting the institution than on protecting vulnerable individuals. It has become clear that the Church needs to refocus on the freedom and dignity of those entrusted to its care and that a climate is needed in which even unpleasant allegations must be investigated objectively, even if this damages the Church's reputation through bad press. The Church, especially in Europe, must rediscover its strength in service. It must be clear and radiate both internally and externally that the Church is not concerned with itself and its glory, but with serving those most in need. In this way, a more positive understanding of power can be regained, one that finds a “modestly proud”⁴⁷ attitude and does not completely dissolve into self-pity and self-accusation, but also sees and develops its own positive potential, which would otherwise also be a form of abuse of power.

The threat to Europe and the tasks arising from it

During their lifetimes, the writer and the theologian perceived Europe as an extremely threatened project and worked to preserve and (re)build it intellectually. There are striking parallels in what they identified as Europe's task. First, a renewed understanding of the nation is required. Neither sought the dissolution of the nation within a larger European whole; rather, each wished to see individual nations understood in proper relation to it. Zweig emphasises that history teaching should present the achievements of other countries within a shared cultural history, so that they are no longer portrayed as enemies, foreigners, or inferior—a distortion that easily arises in military history.⁴⁸ Zweig speaks decisively of the “ideal of a higher harmony among nations while preserving the distinctiveness of

⁴⁷ “bescheiden-stolze”; Theobald, *Christentum als Stil*, 348 [own translation].

⁴⁸ Zweig, “Die moralische Entgiftung Europas,” 107; Zweig, “Geschichtsschreibung von morgen,” 165–81.

all nations”⁴⁹. Guardini likewise rejects both antagonism and mere “juxtaposition”⁵⁰ of nations; instead, he insists that, in their differences, they must recognise themselves as bound together within a spiritual Europe. “Nationalism” must be abandoned, but “not the national itself, not love for one’s nation”⁵¹. Nationalism claims primacy for one’s own nation at the expense of others, whose value and particularity it neither appreciates nor respects.⁵² The theologian speaks out decisively against cosmopolitanism because it produces a person “who is not committed to life anywhere, because he can get ahead just as well elsewhere.”⁵³

Zweig, although unable to articulate the positive value of national sentiment as Guardini does, nevertheless sharply condemns nationalism, calling it a “plague of plagues”.⁵⁴ Equally relevant to the present is their emphasis on the threatening power of lies. Zweig diagnoses hatred and mistrust among nations and traces them to deliberate incitement, by which he means external instigation and manipulative agitation.

“Experience shows that hatred between nations, between races and classes, between individual groups of people, rarely arises from within, but mostly through infection or incitement, and the most dangerous means of inflaming it is public untruth, disseminated through printed matter.”⁵⁵

Zweig proposes concrete measures to achieve the necessary “elimination of lies”⁵⁶. In addition to the power of personal example—especially for the young—expressed through benevolent speech about other nations, he suggests establishing “a supranational authority that would possess the right to correct all political

⁴⁹ “Ideal höherer Eintracht zwischen Nationen bei Wahrung der Eigenart aller Nationen”; Zweig, “Die moralische Entgiftung Europas,” 115 [own translation].

⁵⁰ “Nebeneinander”; Guardini, *Stationen und Rückblicke - Berichte über mein Leben*, 296 [own translation].

⁵¹ “Nationalismus“, “[n]icht das Nationale, die Liebe zur Nation” Guardini, *Ethik*, vol. I, 553 [own translation].

⁵² *Ibid.*, 553.

⁵³ “der nirgends mit seinem Leben einsteht, weil er anderswo ebenso so gut weiterkommen kann.” Guardini, “Europa - Wirklichkeit und Aufgabe,” 241f. [own translation].

⁵⁴ “Erzpest”; Zweig, *Die Welt von Gestern*, 13 [own translation]. Zweig, “Internationalismus oder Kosmopolitismus.”

⁵⁵ “Erfahrungsgemäß entsteht der Haß zwischen Nationen, zwischen Rassen und Klassen, zwischen einzelnen Menschengruppen selten von innen her, sondern meist durch Infektion oder durch Incitation, und das gefährlichste Mittel, ihn anzufachen, ist die öffentliche, die durch Druckschriften verbreitete Unwahrhaftigkeit.” Zweig, “Die moralische Entgiftung Europas,” 113 [own translation].

⁵⁶ “Ausschaltung der Lüge”; *Ibid.*, 115 [own translation].

lies within all European countries”⁵⁷. In this way, he hopes to curb the poisonous and inflammatory effects of slander and lies spread through the press.

Guardini sees the lie as being particularly at work during the National Socialist period. In the 1930s, he gave sermons in Berlin, which were then published in 1937 under the title *The Lord*⁵⁸. In his detailed spiritual addresses on the New Testament, he hints at what he then openly and freely elaborates on in his fundamental analysis of the “twelve years”⁵⁹, as he repeatedly refers to the Nazi era, immediately after the war. *Der Herr* can be read as a counter-image to the *Führer* and the ideas contained therein as a counter-concept to Nazi ideology.⁶⁰ Guardini characterises a desirable state of mind that does not do what he implicitly saw in National Socialism:

“The purity of the spirit is dependent upon truth. A spirit is pure when it makes clear-cut distinctions between great and little, good and bad; when it refuses to bend yes into no and no into yes, but keeps them undistorted by a straight either-or. This doesn’t mean that with the resultant clarity the good is also already accomplished and the bad avoided; it means something much more elementary: that virtue is never called vice, and vice virtue.”⁶¹

For Guardini, the fundamental problem at the root of the National Socialist period was lie, entrenched above all through propaganda, with devastating consequences. Truth was subordinated to expediency and utility. Individual acts of untruth hardened into a general attitude: “The worst thing was that untruth continued to become a self-evident disposition.”⁶²

For Guardini, this constitutes a sickness of the spirit, leading to a condition in which “a person no longer senses truth at all, once he abolishes it”⁶³. Accordingly,

⁵⁷ “übernationale Instanz, die das Recht der Berichtigung aller politischen Lügen innerhalb aller Länder Europas innehatte,”; Zweig, “Die moralische Entgiftung Europas,” 114 [own translation].

⁵⁸ Guardini, *Der Herr*; Guardini, *The Lord*.

⁵⁹ “zwölf Jahre”; Guardini, *Die Existenz des Christen*, 214 [own translation].

⁶⁰ Cf. Gerl-Falkovitz, “»Der Herr« gegen den Führer. Guardinis Christologie als Werk der Erziehung,” 481–88.

⁶¹ “Die Reinheit des Geistes hängt mit der Wahrheit zusammen. Jener Geist ist rein, in welchem die Unterschiede gezogen und die Grenzen bewahrt werden; der das Große groß nennt, und das Kleine klein; der niemals Ja in Nein verkehrt und Nein in Ja; der Gut und Böse durch das unbedingte Entweder-Oder geschieden hält, welches zwischen sie gesetzt ist. Damit soll nicht gesagt sein, daß das Gute auch schon getan und das Böse gemieden werde, sondern etwas viel Früheres: das Gut nie Böse genannt wird und Böse nie Gut.” Guardini, *Der Herr*, 608; Guardini, *The Lord*, 576f.

⁶² “Das Schlimmste war, dass die Unwahrheit weiterhin zur selbstverständlichen Haltung geworden ist.” Romano Guardini, “Die Wahrheit,” 50 [own translation].

⁶³ “ein Mensch überhaupt die Wahrheit nicht mehr empfindet; wenn er sie abschafft”; Ibid., 53 [own translation].

in the post-war period he regarded the re-establishment of truth in speech as the central task. At the end of a lecture entitled *Wahrheit und Lüge*⁶⁴, given in several places in August and September 1945, Guardini concludes:

“The most important thing in life is to encounter something that does not bow down before it, but before which it must bow down, unconditionally, without purpose or intention, without consideration or sideways glances. In this it becomes free; in this it touches eternity, in this it has support and direction.”⁶⁵

Writing retrospectively about his preaching between 1920 and 1943, Guardini writes in *Berichte über mein Leben*:

“What I wanted from the beginning, first instinctively, then more and more consciously, was to bring the truth to light. Truth is a power, but only if one does not demand immediate results from it, but has patience and counts on the long term – even better, if one does not think of results at all, but presents it for its own sake, for its sacred divine greatness.”⁶⁶

Zweig also attempts to use language to devote his life to this cause. In early 1918, he writes to his French literary friend Romain Rolland about his great desire in life, which at first glance may give the impression that writing and speaking are not his main means of achieving his life’s goal: “My goal would be to one day become not a great critic or a literary celebrity, but a *moral authority*. A man like you already are for Europe, for the world. To me, this seems to be the most beautiful thing a human being can achieve.”⁶⁷

For Rolland himself, in his younger years when he was not yet very well known, it was very important that he had written to Tolstoy, the Russian literary star of

⁶⁴ Guardini, “Wahrheit und Lüge,” 61–80.

⁶⁵ “Das Wichtigste für das Leben ist, dass es auf etwas stoße, was sich vor ihm nicht beugt, sondern vor dem es selbst sich beugen muss, unbedingt, ohne Zweck noch Absicht, ohne Rücksicht noch Seitenblick. Darin wird es frei; darin berührt es die Ewigkeit, darin hat es Halt und Richtung.” Ibid., 80 [own translation].

⁶⁶ “Was ich von Anfang an, erst instinktiv, dann immer bewußter gewollt habe, war, die Wahrheit zum Leuchten zu bringen. Die Wahrheit ist eine Macht; aber nur dann, wenn man von ihr keine unmittelbare Wirkung verlangt, sondern Geduld hat und auf lange Zeit rechnet – noch besser, wenn man überhaupt nicht an Wirkungen denkt, sondern sie um ihrer selbst, ihrer heiligen göttlichen Größe willen darstellt.” Guardini, *Stationen und Rückblicke - Berichte über Mein Leben*, 106 [own translation].

⁶⁷ “Mein Ziel wäre, eines Tages nicht ein großer Kritiker, eine literarische Berühmtheit zu werden – sondern eine moralische Autorität. Ein Mann, wie Sie einer für Europa, für die Welt bereits sind. Mir dünkt dies das menschlich Schönste, das man zu erreichen vermag”; 21.01.1918, Rolland and Zweig, *Briefwechsel 1910-1940*, 293 [author’s emphasis, own translation]; Zweig, *Briefe 1914-1919*, 197.

the time, without knowing him, whereupon Tolstoy took the trouble to write him an eight-page letter in French and send it to him. It was this gesture, rather than the content, that had a life-changing effect on the Frenchman:

“From that moment on, Rolland knew that if he truly wanted to be a poet and artist, he could only be so in the sense of being a helpful person, that he had to devote his entire existence to it and transform it into an apostolate of kindness and helpfulness, of readiness.”⁶⁸

According to Zweig, the one “letter of consolation” penned by the Russian inspired countless letters from the Frenchman, which created an “*atmosphere*” that “became a source of help and salvation for thousands of people.”⁶⁹ It was precisely the personal word in a letter, and not just the general word in various publications, that was always important to Zweig, resulting in an impressive and extensive correspondence. Zweig sees the main challenge of his time as not promoting rampant mistrust and adding fuel to the fire of existing hatred through one’s own words. “There is an infinite amount for each of us to do in silence: we must refrain from any words that could increase mistrust between people and nations; on the contrary, we have a positive duty to seize every opportunity to praise the achievements of other races, peoples and countries according to their merits.”⁷⁰

However, since purely reasonable, detached and sober words have little effect, Zweig emphasises on several occasions that what is heard or read must also have an emotional impact. In a undelivered draft speech from 1934, entitled *The Unification of Europe*, he borrows heavily from the extremist movements of the time when he postulates: “[W]e must finally create a demonstrative and *agitational* European policy instead of the humanistic abstract forms of words and brochures.”⁷¹ After the war, Guardini takes a completely different view, although he

⁶⁸ “Rolland weiß von diesem Augenblick an, daß, wenn er wahrhaft Dichter und Künstler sein will, er es nur in dem Sinne eines helfenden Menschen sein kann, daß er seine ganze Existenz aufbieten muß und sie in ein Apostolat der Güte und des Helfens, der Bereitschaft verwandeln muß.” Stefan Zweig, “Romain Rolland,” 88 [own translation].

⁶⁹ “Brief der Tröstung”; “atmosphärisch”; “was Tausenden von Menschen eine Hilfe und eine Rettung geworden ist.” Ibid., 88f. [emphasis added, own translation].

⁷⁰ “Unendlich viel ist für jeden von uns im Stillen zu tun: wir müssen uns jedes Wortes enthalten, welches Misstrauen zwischen Menschen und Nationen steigern könnte; im Gegenteil, wir haben die positive Pflicht, jede Gelegenheit zu ergreifen, um die Leistung anderer Rassen, Völker und Länder nach ihrem Verdienst zu rühmen.” Zweig, “Die geistige Einheit der Welt,” 151f. [own translation].

⁷¹ “[W]ir müssen endlich statt den humanistisch abstrakten Formen des Wortes und der Broschüre eine demonstrative und agitatorische Europapolitik erschaffen.” Zweig, *Einigung Europas*. 12f. [emphasis added, own translation].

is aware that truth must appeal to the emotions.⁷² Under no circumstances does he want to follow the National Socialist propaganda of excessive exaggeration, lies and hatred. After the war ended in 1945, he had young people in mind when he stated that the Nazis' abuse of language had given rise to "major educational tasks"⁷³. He summed these up as follows:

"The educator teaches the young people entrusted to him to speak simply, by showing that positive expression is generally stronger than superlative expression, and that a single adjective is more meaningful than an accumulation of two or three, etc. He teaches them to observe correctly and to describe what they see reliably and clearly."⁷⁴

Zweig also had a particular interest in supporting younger people throughout his life, for example by putting in a good word for them with publishers or providing them with financial assistance.⁷⁵ In his speeches on Europe, he speaks of an educational task that relates above all to the young generation, which is still impressionable and needs to be shaped, so that in the classroom, more emphasis is placed on "commonality,"⁷⁶ the things that unite the European nations, rather than accentuating differences. Zweig knows that purely theoretical instruction does not constitute good pedagogy. A European mindset depends on a "living feeling,"⁷⁷ shaped by exchange programs and personal encounters.

At the moment Democracy is increasingly under threat from targeted disinformation campaigns. Against this backdrop, in mid-November 2025, the European Commission decided to establish a Centre for Democratic Resilience in the following year. One of its tasks is described as follows: "With Member States at its core, the Centre will act as a framework to facilitate information sharing and support capacity building to withstand evolving common threats, in particular foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) and disinformation."⁷⁸ Unlike Zweig, who saw the danger as being more internal to Europe, in this case

⁷² Cf. Guardini, "Unsere Verantwortung für die Sprache," 179.

⁷³ "große pädagogische Aufgaben"; Ibid., 181 [own translation].

⁷⁴ "Der Erzieher lehrt die anvertraute Jugend, einfach zu sprechen, indem er zeigt, dass der positive Ausdruck in der Regel stärker ist als der superlative, und ein einzelnes Eigenschaftswort bedeutungsvoller als die Anhäufung von zweien oder dreien usw. Er lehrt richtig zu beobachten, und das Gesehene zuverlässig und klar darzustellen." Ibid., 182 [own translation].

⁷⁵ E.g. Joseph Roth. See, for example: Roth and Zweig, "Jede Freundschaft mit mir ist verderblich". Joseph Roth und Stefan Zweig *Briefwechsel 1927-1938*.

⁷⁶ "Gemeinsamkeit"; Zweig, "Die moralische Entgiftung Europas," 105 [own translation].

⁷⁷ "das lebendige Gefühl"; Ibid., 110 [own translation].

⁷⁸ European Commission, "European Democracy Shield and EU Strategy for Civil Society."

the focus is on countries and organisations outside the EU that threaten democratic Europe.⁷⁹ More specifically, the opponents are described as authoritarian governments, among other things: “Authoritarian regimes seek to exploit divisions, sow mistrust [...]”⁸⁰

Stefan Zweig also warned of the rise of mistrust. Language ideally enables understanding, yet it can equally stir fears and incite hatred. Guardini and Zweig were well aware of its profound social significance. In social media, physical distance and partial anonymity easily create a climate in which discussions degenerate into hate speech or shitstorms. As a result, democracy and social cohesion are threatened even within Europe. All the more urgent, therefore, is the need for a culture of respect toward differing opinions and for the non-polemical, objective presentation of arguments so that debates do not deteriorate. Guardini emphasized that exaggerated, agitational, and manipulative communication had corrupted people’s minds, thereby paving the way for fascism and ultimately for war. What matters, therefore, is not only what is said and how it is said, but also the willingness to listen— not merely in search of confirmation of one’s own position, but in order to understand that of others. In this way, the shared search for truth can unite people and replace the mere assertion of one’s own positions.

Outlook

Contemporary theology and the Church should serve as a model in the realm of objective, respectful, and sober dialogue – dialogue motivated by the search for truth and, above all, by attentive listening to others and to the Holy Spirit. Such a form of exchange was practiced during the World Synod held in Rome in the autumns of 2023 and 2024, when ecclesial leaders employed the method known as “conversation in the Spirit”. Synodality has the potential to radiate not only within the Church but also into secular society, thereby fostering a new culture of listening.

The abuse scandals have made it evident that the Church needs conversion and a reorientation of thought, placing renewed emphasis on truth, the protection of vulnerable persons, and a humble and service-oriented exercise of power. In this way, the humiliations of recent years – resulting from failures within the Church – can lead to a process of purification and reorientation. Such a transformation constitutes the prerequisite for the Church to function as leaven within (European) society. In this context, the question of the proper use of power has become more pressing than ever, not least due to political shifts and the emergence of

⁷⁹ While foreign influence may play a role, it should be understood primarily as an amplifying factor rather than the sole cause, as many of the underlying dynamics originate within European societies themselves.

⁸⁰ European Commission, “European Democracy Shield and EU Strategy for Civil Society”; Gutschker, “Mit Influencern für die Werte der EU.”

artificial intelligence. What is required is a limitation and proper orientation of power, as well as an ethic governing its responsible use both within the Church and beyond it.

The Catholic Church and theology, in particular, are able to demonstrate the value of being embedded – beyond small circles and national boundaries – within a lived European and international network that, alongside its challenges, contains many riches. This supranational connectedness is cultivated within the Church, for example in the World Youth Days initiated by Pope John Paul II. These events are not merely significant within ecclesial contexts; they also create experiences of peaceful international understanding – despite language barriers –and generate considerable resonance beyond Catholic circles. The connection with other nations must not remain a merely theoretical construct but must continue to be an experienced reality. Stefan Zweig rightly emphasizes the necessity of a living exchange between nations. Through such exchange, one learns to appreciate the other, broadens one’s horizons, and at the same time gains a deeper awareness of one’s own identity. The European project can only flourish if people recognize that it is preferable to be integrated into a supranational structure and that, conversely, nationalism represents an unnecessary limitation and impoverishment – although national particularities and autonomy must not be dissolved, as Euro-sceptics often fear. In this regard, young Catholics can assume a pioneering role.

Furthermore, it would be beneficial if Europe were not bound together solely by geographical circumstances, economic interests, or external threats. But what might constitute its inner cohesion? In the Western world, Christianity is increasingly losing relevance. Not only in Germany does it now represent merely a minority affiliation, and the trend continues to decline. In secular and religiously plural times, therefore, the person of Jesus Christ can no longer function as a universally accepted core. Yet two aspects closely connected with him continue to be widely upheld and are likely to command broad consensus: the significance of the human person and the importance of freedom. In order that these two realities do not become flattened, impoverished, or reduced to mere objects of human manipulation, a creative and inspiring minority is needed – one that continually recalls their roots, points toward the transcendent, and thus serves at least as a questioning corrective. In this sense, Guardini’s statement may still be considered defensible today: “If Europe were to detach itself entirely from Christ – then, and to the extent that this occurred, it would cease to exist”⁸¹ A formative influence can persist even when only a minority keeps the heritage alive and translates it into the present.

⁸¹ “Wenn sich aber Europa ganz von Christus löste - dann, und soweit das geschähe, würde es aufhören zu sein ...” Guardini, “Der Heilbringer in Mythos, Offenbarung und Politik,” 189 [own translation].

Liturgy, in particular, has the potential to break open the immanent closure of a society. At the end of the postscript to the two-volume work *Also a History of Philosophy*,⁸² the secular philosopher Jürgen Habermas writes the following, somewhat surprisingly:

“Ritual claims to connect with a power breaking into the world from transcendence. As long as religious experience can still rely on this practice of re-presenting a powerful transcendence, it will remain a thorn in the flesh of a modernity that succumbs to the pull of an existence devoid of transcendence — and as long as it does so, the question of whether there are still untapped semantic contents awaiting translation ‘into the profane’ will remain open for secular reason.”⁸³

Europe’s leading role has not declined only in the political sphere in recent years. As Stefan Zweig already observed, “Europe has forfeited its right to intellectual leadership.”⁸⁴ Yet this situation could change if Europe were to rediscover its inner strength and thereby once again exert a constructive influence on world affairs. In this regard, the younger generations would be of particular importance. Romano Guardini emphasized this point in 1923 at a conference for young people, where he expressed the view that the youth movement and the question of Europe were closely interconnected.⁸⁵

Years later, however, he addressed a warning to a gathering that transcended generational boundaries: “Europe, too, can miss its hour. That would mean that unification would not be realized as a step toward a freer life, but rather as a descent into a shared servitude.”⁸⁶ Freedom must therefore be regarded as a higher value than unity. To be young, Catholic, and European is therefore both a great gift and a profound responsibility – to uphold the dignity of the person and the reality of freedom in the face of manifold challenges.

⁸² Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*; Habermas, *Also a History of Philosophy*.

⁸³ “Der Ritus beansprucht, die Verbindung mit einer aus der Transzendenz in die Welt einbrechenden Macht herzustellen. Solange sich die religiöse Erfahrung noch auf die Praxis der Vergegenwärtigung einer starken Transzendenz stützen kann, bleibt sie ein Pfahl im Fleische der Moderne, die dem Sog zu einem transzendenzlosen Sein nachgibt – und so lange hält sie auch für die säkulare Vernunft die Frage offen, ob es unabgegoltene semantische Gehalte gibt, die noch einer Übersetzung »ins Profane« harren.“ Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. II., 807; Habermas, *Also a History of Philosophy*, vol. III, 437f.

⁸⁴ “Europa hat das Recht auf die geistige Führung verwirkt”. Zweig, “Die geistige Einheit der Welt,” 151 [own translation].

⁸⁵ Cf. Gerl-Falkovitz, *Romano Guardini*, 93f.; Gerl-Falkovitz, “Heidnisches und christliches Europa in Gegenspannung. Zum 140. Geburtstag Romano Guardinis (1885-1968),” 434f.

⁸⁶ “Auch Europa kann seine Stunde versäumen. Das würde bedeuten, daß eine Einung nicht als Schritt in freieres Leben, sondern als ein Absinken in gemeinsame Knechtschaft verwirklicht würde.” Guardini, “Europa - Wirklichkeit und Aufgabe,” 253 [own translation].

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RECLAIMING HERITAGE. HEGEL, TROELTSCH, AND HANNA REICHEL ON TRANSFORMATION AND THE QUESTION OF METHOD IN THEOLOGY

David Schilling

Abstract:

This chapter analyses the problem of how transformation can be possible in the context of method-based theological thinking. It shows how throughout European modernity the notion of radical transformation which gives rise to something entirely new has been introduced to method. While radical transformation promises to forcefully disrupt the given order of things, method-guided thinking seeks knowledge by carefully exploring and reconstructing this order. At its highest point, method therefore acknowledges its inability to think the radically new. Consequently, this chapter explores the aporia of methodological thinking that fails to recognize its limits and tries to set transformation in motion by its own means. But if method-guided transformation is impossible, what then can be the task of theology in our age of transformation? To address this question, the chapter introduces the concept of *reclaiming heritage*. It argues that method-guided thinking and academic theology in particular cannot partake in transforming the present into a distinct future by transforming historical forms into something new. What it can do, however, is transform the present itself in its relation to its tradition. By understanding tradition as heritage rather than as identity, tradition is conceived not as self-evident possession but as something that must be actively appropriated and reclaimed. By the practice of reclaiming heritage, the forms of the past may appear as refreshingly new and unknown and thereby open new possibilities for understanding and transforming the present.

Introduction

Being young – being Catholic – being European: today these terms seem to raise questions rather than provide orientation. The editors of this volume presumably intended to provoke dissent from this triad – or perhaps dissent from dissent itself. One might respond that being young, being Catholic, and being European is *still* a possible and meaningful perspective despite everything that seems to speak against it. This “still”, however, must acknowledge the history of violence, exclusion, and injustice that accompanies names such as “Catholic” and “Europe”. Even if these terms are old, contested, and worn, they might still hold new meaning and perhaps offer some form of intellectual, political, or spiritual orientation for a new generation.

Exploring the dimensions of this “still” has become a familiar genre of Western intellectual discourse. This is particularly true in the context of Catholicism, where such reflections have been written for decades. The premise is clear: that everything seems to stand against it, that the project might even be a lost cause – or at least appear so. This perspective is by no means new. As someone who belongs to a younger generation, I was trained by theologians committed to defending precisely this “still”. And they are right: the realities of today’s Church make such a defensive stance understandable. To claim that somewhere within this Church’s tradition there are still resources capable of speaking to our age requires extensive justification. Any access to the tradition of European Christian thought must simultaneously be critical of it; every positive identification must place itself under scrutiny. I do not wish to return to a pre-critical relation to the cultural and religious forms that structure my world. Yet I wonder whether there might still be a possibility for a European theology that relates to its cultural heritage in a less defensive way.

In this chapter I therefore propose to turn the tables: might our permanent questioning of European Christian identity conceal a different problem altogether? As Bruno Latour has argued, European modernity is characterized by an obsession with being absolutely different from everything else.¹ While other cultures are explored, exploited, and perhaps eventually recognized, European culture appears primarily as the culture that explores, exploits, and recognizes difference. “Our” identity, therefore, seems to consist precisely in relativizing every cultural context. There is no identity, only reflection. To paraphrase Nietzsche, nothing may be as European in modernity as the question of what being European actually means.² Cultural identities seem to belong only to “others”, who can therefore become objects of ethnographic research. Latour accordingly calls for an “anthropology of modernity” capable of deconstructing the myth that modernity has transcended the nature–culture divide. Such an anthropology, I suggest, must also lead to a different attitude toward our cultural and religious heritage. To explore this shift of perspective, I will examine a problem that lies at the heart of European modernity and continues to shape contemporary theology: the question of method.

By “method” I simply mean a regulated way of proceeding. Method promises that one can move from what is already known to something new while preserving a certain degree of security. It transfers the reliability of established knowledge to what is still unknown. In this sense, method answers the practical “question of *how to proceed*”³.

¹ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.

² “Es kennzeichnet die Deutschen, dass bei ihnen die Frage ,was ist deutsch? niemals ausstirbt.” Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 184.

³ Reichel, *After Method*, 14.

As young, Catholic, European theologians we encounter this question in several ways. As Europeans, we ask *how to find our place* within the global Church in a postcolonial world. As Catholics, we wonder *how to live our faith* in an increasingly secular Europe, how to contribute constructively to current social transformations, and how to respond to new authoritarian movements that invoke Christianity while reshaping the political landscape of liberal Europe. As members of a younger generation, we must ask *how to relate to the tradition* of a very old Church and how to mediate between our present moment and a long, complex, and rich heritage. Each of these questions reveals tensions within the matrix constituted by the terms “young”, “Catholic”, and “European”. “Who are we?” – and especially “Who are we in relation to the tradition we have inherited?” – seems to be one of the central questions of our time.

The European concept of method, deeply rooted in both early modern spirituality and scientific practice, promises a certain degree of security here. Can method provide the missing link between tradition and modernity?

Such security indeed appears desirable. Although religion – and Catholicism in particular – is no longer a mass phenomenon in contemporary Europe, we nevertheless witness new appropriations of Christianity. Far-right political movements, for example, increasingly present agendas that many regard as inhumane, as authentic interpretations of Christian tradition. Similarly, the name “Europe” often serves as a convenient label for widely differing ideological projects. The alternative to method, therefore, seems to be blind ideology.

By “ideology” I mean a framework of interpretation that offers coherent and action-guiding answers to complex questions without submitting itself to the procedural and historical constraints of method. Ideology can therefore answer questions as well as method – only faster, simpler, and without methodological restraint. Most of the time the results are disastrous. Yet something is not wrong merely because it is ideological, at least if the term is not understood in a strongly normative sense. Ideology promises rapid and far-reaching transformation unencumbered by the slower procedures of methodological reflection – a promise that can appear attractive when the contemporary world is experienced as deeply unsatisfying.⁴

Method, by contrast, allows us to analyse the historical forms of Catholicism with scholarly precision. Yet it remains difficult to translate such knowledge into transformative insight capable of shaping the present. Should method not provide a secure bridge between scholarly understandings of Catholicism and the lived

⁴ The recent book of Amlinger and Nachtwey provides shocking data on a significant proportion of the population that is willing to lay our society in ashes to see it change to anything else. Amlinger and Nachtwey, *Zerstörungslust*.

identity of the communities attached to it? If theology is more than historical knowledge of Christianity – and I believe it is – it must also articulate social, intellectual, or spiritual visions capable of addressing our current age of transformation. If Europe’s intellectual and spiritual traditions still contain such resources, then it is the task of a theology that understands itself as European to retrieve them and transform inherited forms into a liveable future. In this sense, the question of theology today becomes a question of method.

Yet precisely here a difficulty arises. If method secures continuity with what is already known, how could it lead to genuine transformation? Does the idea of “methodological transformation” not contain a contradiction? The future – whether understood historically, politically, or theologically – appears precisely as that which exceeds methodological control. Especially when history is understood in terms of salvation history, the future may arrive as something radically new, disrupting the order of things rather than emerging from it. To which future, then, is scientific theology obliged: the unforeseeable future known only to God, or the future that can be reached by method? Must theology ultimately leave method behind?

Method and Transformation in European Modernity

Since I am not able to predict the future, I am going to take a look at the past. To illustrate my argument, I begin with a brief look at a radical transformation that took place in the wake of modernity. Among the works of the German Mystic Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), there is a famous sermon on Jesus’s encounter with Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42, *Intravit Iesus in quoddam castellum*.⁵ In this story, Jesus visits the two sisters Mary and Martha in their home. While Mary listens to the teachings of Jesus, Martha is occupied with household chores. As she wants Jesus to ask Mary to help her with her work, he answers: “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:41–42) Mary and Martha symbolize the medieval order of *vita contemplativa* and *activa*. Mary listens to the word of God while Martha does all the care work that Mary cannot do, having chosen the better part. Eckhart disrupts this order: for Eckhart, Martha has chosen the better part, being relieved of listening to the word and free to act according to it, thereby anticipating a major drift of modern spirituality that will transform the medieval order of things. The crucial point in Eckhart’s interpretation is that he contradicts the very words of the Lord himself, who says according to Luke that Mary has chosen what is better, while with Eckhart Jesus ends up meaning the very opposite of what he just said: “Martha and all the friends of God are ‘with care’ but not ‘in care’; there temporal work is as noble as any communing with God, for it joins us to Him as closely as

⁵ In M. Walshe’s English translation, it is sermon no. 9 (no. 86 according to the count of the German critical edition). Meister Eckhart, *Sermons & Treatises*.

the highest that can happen to us except the vision of God in His naked nature.”⁶ I want to stress the *skandalon* that lies in the very beginning of this transformation: it is not guided by any proven method, but rather sets an entirely new, unpredictable framework for understanding Scripture, thereby constituting a new method. This transformation was only made possible by transformation itself.

In a way, this notion of transformation becomes the program of European modernity. Modern thought tries again and again to conceive of an absolute beginning that overcomes traditional values and establishes a new order of things only by its own means.⁷ Radical transformation is thereby introduced to method. This notion meets its most radical realisation in the works of G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831). Hegel claims that we indeed can in thinking make an absolute beginning out of which, along with its explication, the true order of things is constructed by method. His whole philosophy is to be understood as the methodological explication of the first, original transformation that set the whole process in motion. Within this process, we can understand that this original transformation has taken place and that it is within our power to make this transformation; but neither can we understand how transformation actually is possible nor how to set it in motion intentionally. It is actually *because* of Hegel’s philosophy being a philosophy of transformation in the most radical way, that it is for Hegel impossible to assess transformation from an outside perspective. Transformation, we could say, is the outmost horizon of any possible thought. Along the way of its methodological explication, reason becomes fully aware of itself and its transformative nature, until in the end the self-knowing absolute idea is identified with method, that is to say the process of the idea’s self-recognition. Yet this knowledge also does not provide any solid ground for thinking to rest and from which to employ method on subjects other than itself. Rather, it understands that transformation is always already at work. It is not method that makes transformation possible, but the other way around. Yet, *that* there is transformation, a transition to something new, transcends the realm of method and therefore is an act of freedom. Thus, the very end of Hegel’s philosophy is the notion of something radically new that can be

⁶ Ibid., 85.

⁷ Descartes serves as a classical example: “pour toutes les opinions que j’avais reçues jusque alors en ma créance, je ne pouvais mieux faire que d’entreprendre, une bonne fois, de les en ôter, afin d’y en remettre par après, ou d’autres meilleures, ou bien les mêmes, lorsque je les aurais ajustées au niveau de la raison.” Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, 24.

grasped by reason and yet is inaccessible for method.⁸ Philosophy, i.e. methodological thinking, thus is only possible retrospectively, as Hegel famously says, the owl of Minerva begins its flight not until dusk.⁹

Yet, attaining the radical new by method (in a broader sense) becomes to a certain extent the temptation of post-Hegelian philosophy and here my question actually arises. I will build my case on the Protestant historicist theologian and historian Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923). The work of the later Troeltsch is devoted to the question of how to think of a new European culture under the conditions of historicism. Historicism, first an intellectual movement and since the early 20th century also considered an intellectual *problem*, thinks of history as the fundamental category of all human knowledge. Every sociocultural form, every thought, every truth, and every value is conceived as ultimately contingent and subjected to its historical conditions.¹⁰ Obviously, the tantalizing question soon emerges, how to still think of any validity that can constitute culture if everything is relative. In the aftermath of World War I, for Troeltsch not least a cultural catastrophe, the entire future of Europe seemed to depend on this question.¹¹ As a solution, Troeltsch proposes in his last and seminal work *The Problems of Historicism* (1922) to create out of Europe's cultural heritage, explored and displayed by historicism, a "cultural synthesis"¹² and thereby to launch the transformation of postwar Europe to a truly new European culture with supra-historical values that are yet to be found within history. After the disruptive violence of war, transformation, the "cultural work of the present time"¹³, now seems to be possible *only by method*: the task is to relate "the concentration, simplification, and immersion of the cultural contents that European history passed on to us and that must come forth out of the melting pot of historicism in new coherence and uniformity"¹⁴ to the social forms of the present to enable a new cultural synthesis. Of course, Troeltsch knew perfectly well himself that there could be no "manual" for such a cultural synthesis but that it rather would be left to "the creative action and venture of those who believe in the future."¹⁵ Yet, Troeltsch is convinced that this new cultural synthesis is within the reach of methodological philosophy of history.¹⁶

⁸ Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 752–53. It is not possible to develop Hegel's highly complex argument any further within the given space. For an extensive interpretation, see Nuzzo, *Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely*. An abbreviated version of Nuzzo's demanding study can be found in Nuzzo, "Critique, Refutation, Appropriation", 625–40. For Hegel's account on method see also Longuenesse, *Hegel's Critique of Metaphysics*, 8.

⁹ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 23.

¹⁰ For an account on Historicism see Schnädelbach, *Geschichtsphilosophie nach Hegel*.

¹¹ Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, 173–74.

¹² *Ibid.*, 349. My translation.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1093. My translation.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1097. My translation.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1098. My translation.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 251–258.

For Troeltsch, the philosophy of history is a highly practical science. Accordingly, he does not conceive history as something to be predicted by methodological thinking but something to be *made*. But still, how can Troeltsch think of methodological transformation as possible? I think the answer lies in the aporia of historical consciousness. If historicism claims every notion to be limited and bound to its historical circumstances, it also expresses, like it or not, a meta-historical truth. Can the sentence:

“Everything is historically relative”, itself again be understood as historically relative? Either way, it would contradict itself. Nevertheless, Troeltsch seems to think that he can resolve this paradox which actually is, by definition, unresolvable. By the power of scientific method, he can dissolve any so far undisputed truth of our present as produced by contingent historical processes, thereby making a statement on the ultimate nature of all things. At the end of his book, Troeltsch thus sees the possibility to “overcome history through history itself”.¹⁷

But this overcoming must point to a standpoint outside of history, from which only the transformation of the present becomes possible.¹⁸

Different to Hegel, Troeltsch wants to *employ* the self-transparency of method to create something new, to put something in action by method. Troeltsch therefore tends to “get” history, “get” our present time. We “get” history insofar as we know how it “works”; that, for example, a period of stability and consolidation is followed by a period of disruption and transformation when it must face a crisis too big to simply overcome; that in history, everyone is playing their role, unwillingly contributing to something that becomes manifest only in retrospect. Do we not, trying to diagnose the state of our own age to the end of setting its transformation in motion, take a standpoint outside of our own time, as if there were any outside of history from which we could assess our own situation within history? In the Hegelian framework Troeltsch still is entangled in, the problem emerges exactly at this point: in pure thought, completed self-reflection usually leads to the emergence of a higher level, a new outside, from which the whole situation is to be reevaluated. This is the trap of Troeltsch’s philosophy of history: in rendering everything as historically relative the self-fulfilment of historicism *should* give rise to a new, post-historicist thinking. But it just fails to do so – everything is still historically relative, *even if* this sentence expresses a meta-historical truth. At this point, it is no longer about being right or wrong, about whether we actually

¹⁷ Ibid., 1098. My translation. In the German original, the famous quote reads: “Die Idee des Aufbaues heißt Geschichte durch Geschichte überwinden und die Plattform neuen Schaffens ebnen.”

¹⁸ In his lucid analysis of this Problem, Christoph Schwöbel therefore states that Troeltsch’s philosophy of history at its end is in need of a theological foundation. Schwöbel, “Die Idee des Aufbaus heißt Geschichte durch Geschichte überwinden”, 281.

can know our place in history. For even if we could know, it would not be of any use. The self-transparent lucidity of method cannot put transformation in motion. It cannot initiate change: “Method cannot save us.”¹⁹

This last sentence quotes Hanna Reichel’s recent book *After Method*, which deals with a similar problem in a different context: the question of the possibility of theology according to Karl Barth and a next generation Theology of Liberation. Within Reichel’s Barthian framework, method appears to be the human hubris that tries to know God by its own means, thereby failing to acknowledge God as *totaliter aliter*, completely different, and not recognizing God as God from whom alone comes salvation. Coming on the other hand from Marcella Althaus-Reid, for Reichel, it is the queer realities of LGBTQ communities that positively exceed the hold of worldly method and allow one to think of another world.²⁰ Yet, Reichel proceeds, the disruptive force of mere anti-normativity and anti-method cannot save us either, but only reproduce the very binary oppositions queer theory tries to overcome.²¹ Instead, there must be a different use of method *after* the impossible use of method:

“Greek *methodos* literally means: a way around, beyond, besides, or an after-way. [...] Linger and repetition rather than linear succession mark its methodological path. As it proceeds, it does not necessarily progress; its movement may be more one of exploration than of advance, or seem stuck in recurring loops [...] more than in terms of ‘vertically’ ascending and leaving behind.”²²

As long as methodological proceeding is strictly understood in terms of progress, there also must be some sort of extramundane view, an outside from which process can be rendered as progress compared to an absolute scale. Reichel leaves this notion behind. Method now becomes a tool at work *within* a process and no longer as its founding principle. *Method after method* does not need to try anymore to attain the radical new but just to do *better*.²³ Contrasting Troeltsch, methodological transformation becomes possible not by the power of supra-historical method, but after the impossibility of method. It is not method in itself that is impossible but transformation: without the impossible possibility of transformation, set in motion only by the totally different God, method remains a possible, but vain and empty practice. Here, we end up where we have started with in Meister Eckhart: the possibility of successful method depends on something out

¹⁹ Reichel, *After Method*, 104.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

²² *Ibid.*, 171–72.

²³ *Ibid.*, 240.

of its reach. Methodological transformation only is possible within a transformation already taking place. And if there is the possibility of the radical new, it is only because it is always already there.

The methodological subjectivity

Reichel's book is concerned with the classical Protestant *topos* of the absolute difference between *opus Dei* and *opus hominum*. Nevertheless, I think we can apply this notion to our question of method and transformation. Reichel's work relates to our issue insofar as it employs the notion of a practice that remains wrong, even if it is true from a factual point of view. For example, Reichel claims: "all theologies are wrong, but some are useful."²⁴ Theology never can "get it right": not because of the limits of human understanding, but because of the sinful distortion of all human action. Therefore, the very best method can do is lying by telling the truth.²⁵ Our question of method is only an actual problem, if method *can* "tell the truth", if it *can* conceive transformation. It is this very impossibility of an actually potent method we need to explore further.

In the thought of Troeltsch, this impossibility appeared as the self-contradicting historical consciousness, which renders everything as relative, thereby positing itself outside of history as the structuring principle of history, as method. The impossibility of method can only appear if method is something real, if it can really do what it promises. A weak method that cannot gain real knowledge of the world or constitute real action cannot appear as a problem. Only in its self-transparent lucidity method can actually know its own impossibility, that is, method ultimately must recognize itself by the power of methodological knowledge to acknowledge that it cannot perform a radical transformation by its own means. Yet, it is not transformation itself that is impossible, which rather deceptively appears as a possibility within the realm of method. The impossibility lies in method itself, which in the face of transformation posits itself outside of the process of transformation when actually there is no outside. Method posits itself outside of the process into a stance of reflection, because it knows "what is going on". Method considers itself a neutral observer. In trying to deconstruct the notion of the neutral observer, Hegel famously used to speak of the "cunning of reason"²⁶ that is constantly at work in our actions. This often completely misunderstood concept means that a finite agent cannot know the totality of determination his actions are entangled in and therefore also cannot know the end to which his actions add up in the long run. Like champagne, intellectual innovations also may come by accident. But what if one has got insight into this principle? Does not a methodological thinking that becomes aware of the principles it is guided

²⁴ Ibid., 236.

²⁵ Ibid., 103–104.

²⁶ Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 663.

by undergo the temptation of producing such an accident intentionally?²⁷ Can method be too informed about itself? This is the *impossible position* of European thought we manoeuvred ourselves into.

Of course, Troeltsch died a hundred years ago, and his problems are not necessarily ours. But I think that this impossible position gives rise to a certain subjectivity that tends to posit itself in a similar way outside of the contexts it is entangled in and that is at work in our question from the beginning: How can we as Catholic theologians contribute to our age of transformation? I claim further that it is this “We” that perpetuates the deadlock of the impossible position by positing itself outside of its context. It must do so, because there is no actual subjectivity behind it. When we speak of *our* age, *our* culture, of *us* as Europeans, as Catholics, of *our* task to contribute to the transformation, we unwittingly insinuate that there is some sort of *cultural metaphysical subject* speaking that can claim unbroken continuity with its tradition. Yet, this insinuation builds on a metaphysical fallacy. As Kant has already shown rigorously, there is no way to deduce an actual subject from a transcendental principle of thought (“The *I think* must be able to accompany all my representations”²⁸).

The fact that subjectivity is the structuring principle of our language and our thinking in general does not allow us to hypostatize subjective structure to an actual subject.²⁹ Thus, the “We” cannot simply be understood as referring to any pre-given identity. It is nothing but a proxy-subject. So why do we use the “We” anyway? It appears that we do not use the “We” in the sense of *pluralis maiestatis* but rather as an academic or *methodological subject*: “We” can be anyone who proceeds by method drawing the same conclusions as us. By this, we indicate that our conclusions are not merely our subjective view but are guided by method and are intersubjectively verifiable. It is, one might say, the transcendental subjectivity that structures the scientific community (or whichever community is implicated), but it is *not* the scientific community itself as a group of concrete, existing subjects, which to assume would be a metaphysical fallacy. Yet, this important distinction seems to get confused from time to time, especially when it comes to transformation, that is, the impact science and method should have in constructing the society we live in. Western intellectuals often tend to ask questions just like ours: How can *we as Catholic, European theologians* contribute to our age of transformation? It is a reflection of method, not an actual subject speaking; there is no pre-given fixed identity to which “We” is referring to. For, if it would,

²⁷ The thought of the later Heidegger revolves around this problem that Heidegger addresses as “the event”. But ultimately, the event is unavailable for human reasoning and must appear as fate. In the end, Heidegger even comes to a similar conclusion as Barth: “Only a God can save us.” Heidegger, “Spiegel-Gespräch mit Martin Heidegger”, 671. My translation.

²⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 131.

²⁹ Ibid., B 406–07.

the notion of method would be lost. The methodological subject would be an actual subject, and the problem of transformation would be exclusively the question of politics – with all its advantages and disadvantages – and not of method. On the other hand, if no actual subject is speaking, who is going to act according to the knowledge provided by method? Again, method destructively interferes with transformation.

In our case, perhaps the problem is of even greater intricacy. Already, before every further consideration, we must concede that neither “European” nor “Catholic” can claim any undisputed meaning, but rather serve as umbrella terms, which is in a way one of the premises of this volume. Those terms are not only challenged by postcolonial, secular or feminist critique, even more, they no longer refer to homogenous identities. The mere name “Catholic” does no longer tell us much about the person or the institution to which it refers. We cannot, for example, just assume any Catholic would agree with the “official” teachings of the Roman Church only because he or she identifies as Catholic – just as no one necessarily must be dissenting from church only because of being a modern European. Furthermore, do we in times of increasingly popular authoritarian, homophobic “conservative” interpretations of European tradition still want to claim that *we as Europeans* follow an agenda of human rights, democracy and LGBTQ rights that is fundamentally at odds with Roman Catholicism? On the other side, today it is questionable whether *we as Catholics* intrinsically have a real interest in contributing to the transformation of secular society or in giving that transformation a clear, unanimous direction. This is not simply a problem of “postmodernist” arbitrariness that could be overcome by going back to the unambiguity of better times. The problem I am getting at is the fallacious hypostatization of the methodological subjectivity to a *cultural metaphysical subject* that can never be filled empirically, since it has no correspondence in reality. This cultural metaphysical subject appears to claim unbroken continuity to the tradition it refers to and thereby constructs a cultural *identity*. “We as Catholics”, or “as Europeans” unintentionally construct a homogenous identity that wrongly presumes to speak for a group of actual subjects. Thus, we are faced with a dilemma: If the methodological “We” is not to be filled empirically for there is no actual community that corresponds to it, “we” remain outside of the concrete contexts whose transformation into something new we want to participate in. Again, how can we *methodically* contribute to our age of transformation? We must conclude that in this question is simply no real subject speaking. But, especially as theologians, we must always give an account of who is the subject speaking in our theology. As I have shown, this remains impossible as long as this subject remains the purely logical subject of method. Only a theology that gives voice to a real subject can avoid the deadlock of the impossible position. Maybe it is only a change of perspective. But to make this change visible, I will, during the remainder of this chapter, only use “I” instead of “We”.

Reclaiming Heritage

How is the problem of method to be solved? At the beginning, I stated that I would reframe this problem by taking a more affirmative perspective regarding the European cultural identity. In the last two sections I showed how the modern notion of method tends to think of itself as a meta-perspective, forgetting about the irreducible contexts and perspectives it is embedded in. Any possible solution to this problem must give account to the irreducible perspectivity of method. I will dedicate the remaining section of this chapter to outline such a possible solution.

At this point, my analysis of the question of method may appear as a fundamental critique and a last farewell to method. As I have shown, method acknowledges at its highest point its inability to imagine something radically new. In an age like mine, where radical transformation seems so duly needed, it is tempting to let go of method and give in to the disruptive power of transformation unsupervised by method. But for me, this is not an option. In letting go of method in favour of transformation, I would at the same time admit that academic theology cannot contribute any longer to the pressing questions of my time. Following Hanna Reichel, I rather want to think of a *method after method* that prevents the impossible position and yet enables a methodological access to my cultural heritage that still allows transformation. Since it is only myself speaking, I cannot claim the self-evident continuity to this heritage like the methodological subject does in constructing a cultural identity. For even if I think of it as *my* heritage, this indicates less a possession than an assignment. Unlike the notion of a clear and distinct cultural identity, heritage is not something to be owned as pre-given and self-evident, but is to be *reclaimed*. Thinking of tradition as heritage instead of identity also follows the meaning of *traditio/παράδοσις* in the New Testament (e.g. 1 Cor. 11:2). Tradition as heritage rather than identity cannot be used to define myself against others, as a given identity telling me what I am and others are not. Tradition in this sense means something that is assigned to me and yet cannot become operative without me actively participating, that is, claiming it as *my* tradition. This claim actually is a *reclaim* because it does not concern something brought forth entirely by myself but rather is a “return” or an affirmation of a context I always have already been in. Of course, this cannot mean to affirm anything just as it is and as it claims to always have been. But it means that my determinate world, my time, and my tradition are the irreducible context every possible transformation must be thought of and can take place in. What may seem obvious has been everything other than obvious throughout European modernity and, as I think I have shown, is haunting “our” thinking until today.

My rejection of the first-person plural may altogether be seen as a rejection of the communal and supra-individual aspects of theology and tradition, leading into a

solipsistic reinvention of what it means to be Christian. Quite the opposite, I understand reclaiming heritage as an essentially social practice through which a community relates to its tradition. Because there is no given, self-identical essence of Christianity and no heritage apart from the practice of reclaiming it, I cannot presuppose this community, which is itself the very effect of that practice. After all, my faith is not my property, given to me by birth, but the creed I share with those who reclaim the same heritage. Therefore, theology – if it wants to be genuinely transformative – cannot be without the confessional community to which it is addressed. Without this community, theology becomes nothing more and nothing less than academic scholarship that may even “get it right” but nevertheless lacks transformative impact. This also means that I should never simply assume that I, as a “Catholic” theologian, can speak on behalf of this community. In doing so, I would presuppose this community as a given identity and thereby participate in solidifying a hegemonic interpretation of its tradition, from which others would in the end have to begin reclaiming their heritage.

The question of method in theology, therefore, is not a question of right or wrong. Nor is it primarily the question of how to proceed from what is given to something new and as yet unthought. Rather, theology concerns itself with relating what may appear to some as an old and worn-out tradition to the community that understands itself as its heir – the very community within which theology takes place. The German word *Bestimmung* can help to express this task. It cannot easily be translated into English, since it simultaneously means vocation, determination, and decision. Theology, in this sense, concerns itself with the *Bestimmung* of the present through something that has been happening and being thought for ages. The proper time of theology is therefore not simply the present as a passing moment nor the present in relation to its future, but a present that knows its past and thereby becomes capable of determining itself. In this sense, method can indeed be transformative insofar as it participates in the ongoing reclamation of tradition. Method and particularly theology can show that even my age of disrupting transformation – modernity itself – is not radically different from anything else, not the radically new in itself, but rather something that *has* a history.³⁰ Method cannot transform the present into the future. What it can transform is the present itself: it can transform a merely passing present into a present that is present to itself. Through method, therefore, the present can become presence.

I wrote this chapter under the influence of a certain impression: all over the world, young people are beginning to reclaim their heritage against the oppression of one-sided traditions, against the “it has always been like this”, and to discover the old as something new. Today, however, for many young Catholics in Europe the experience of this oppressive tradition seems to overshadow the critical reservoir

³⁰ Thus, modernity itself is not the radical break it claims to be, but itself a historical formation, as Bruno Latour has shown. Latour, *We Never Have Been Modern*.

that heritage can be. Reclaiming heritage means standing up against oppressive appropriations of tradition and creating new meanings of tradition. In reclaiming heritage, the question of what might still be left of Europe's great tradition becomes less pressing, for it is precisely through such acts of reclaiming that new meaning is given to names such as "Europe" or "Catholic".³¹ Reclaiming heritage is itself a transformative practice. It is not foreign to method, since it transforms the dead forms of history into a heritage that can shape the present and eventually even open the possibility of new, liveable futures. In reclaiming European or Catholic heritage, one does not place oneself outside tradition but deliberately within it, thereby establishing method anew as an instrument that operates within an ongoing process rather than serving as its governing principle – that is, as a practice that persists even after the limits of method have become apparent. In this sense reclaiming heritage can itself be understood as a kind of method, since it answers the question of how to re-relate to one's cultural heritage. Yet it is a method after the limits of method: it is always situated in a concrete context and does anything but abstract from it. Reclaiming heritage means accepting tradition not as self-evident but as something different and thus far unknown to me, thereby opening the possibility of stepping inside and thinking radically from within. If being young means to re-evaluate and perhaps "to do better"³² than what has been considered self-evident for a long time, then it is nothing else but being young that opens a new path for me towards being European and being Catholic.

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³² Reichel, *After Method*, 240.

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TIME FOR ANOTHER REVOLUTION? – PERSONALISM, EUROPEAN FEDERALISM AND THE FUTURE OF HUMAN DIGNITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Stephen Wissing

Abstract

This essay enquires as to the significance the philosophy of personalism has in the 21st century. Personalism is a mostly forgotten philosophical movement of the mid-20th century, which had a major impact on politics, Catholicism and European societies especially in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. After introducing some main characteristics of personalism, the essay explores three philosophical key figures (Emmanuel Mounier, Jacques Maritain, Denis de Rougemont) and their influence on European politics and the Catholic church in post-war Europe. This influence is illustrated by looking at historical politicians Konrad Adenauer, Alcide De Gasperi and Robert Schuman. In a final step, it will be considered and discussed, which helpful insights personalism may have for young people, Catholics and Europeans regarding today's global challenges.

Introduction

The philosophy of “Personalism” was one of the most popular and influential philosophical movements in Europe in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Historian Samuel Moyn understands it as “the key to the turn to human rights” after 1945.¹ Personalism was “one element of a European reinvention of its humanism”.² It had, ultimately, a major impact on politics, theology and philosophy in post-war Western Europe.³ There would be no human rights after 1945 without personalism, as Moyn argues.⁴ However, personalism seems to have been “[f]orgotten now”.⁵ Unfairly?

This essay aims to examine the 20th century roots of the philosophy of personalism and its impact after 1945. After presenting some general definitions, three central personalist thinkers and their dealings with the challenges of their times shall be presented: Emmanuel Mounier (1905–1950), Jacques Maritain (1882–1973) and Denis de Rougemont (1906–1985). What did they think and write about the human person? How did they shape thoughts on democracy, the Catholic Church and Europe? I will examine the specific impact their thoughts had on

¹ Moyn, “Personalism,” 86.

² Ibid., 87.

³ Müller, *Contesting Democracy*, 125–170.

⁴ Moyn, “Personalism,” 87.

⁵ Ibid., 86.

Europe and the church after World War II. Their influence will be illustrated by looking at historical politicians Konrad Adenauer (1876–1967), Alcide De Gasperi (1881–1954) and Robert Schuman (1886–1963). In a last part the essay poses the question whether personalism is still relevant today for the young, the Catholic or the European. In other words, can we learn something from the personalism of the mid-20th century for today – our societies in general, but also for the current status of European integration? In times of rising far-right authoritarianism as well as of climate change, AI or the crisis of international law, human dignity seems to be at stake like never before since 1945. These new realities pose significant challenges to European societies in particular and human beings in general. Can there be insights and inspirations from personalist thinkers for life in the 21st century? What could be reasons to stop “forgetting” this philosophy? Of course, there can be no simple “Re-Catholicisation”, but it could be helpful to consider translating old insights into today’s thinking and speaking.

What is “Personalism”? – Definition(s)

The idea of personalism as a philosophy dates back to the 19th century.⁶ It arose both in America and Europe.⁷ It was not until the first half of the 20th century that it gained lasting effects. As it is often the case in philosophy, it is difficult to give one single and general answer to the question “What is Personalism?” It would be more accurate to speak of personalisms in plural.⁸ French philosopher Jacques Maritain stated in 1947 that here are “a dozen personalist doctrines”.⁹ Thus, it can be seen more as a broader world view.¹⁰ However, there are some central aspects that most of the personalisms share. As the name suggests, the human person is central to this philosophical movement and seen within it as possessing an inviolable dignity that must be respected unconditionally.¹¹ Personalism “emphasizes the significance, uniqueness and inviolability of the person, as well as the person’s essentially relational or social dimension”.¹² The person is a “being-for-relation”.¹³ So, the person’s freedom always contains a responsibility for the community.¹⁴ Personalism seeks its foundations in human reason and experience, but often also in Christian ideas or the Bible (many personalists were theists, but not all of them).¹⁵

⁶ See for an overview: De Tavernier, “The Historical Roots,” 361–392.

⁷ This essay focuses on the Western European approaches.

⁸ Williams and Bengtsson, “Personalism,”.

⁹ Maritain, *The Person*, 12–13.

¹⁰ Williams and Bengtsson, “Personalism”.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Deweer, “Personalisme,” 11–25.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Personalism, especially the French version in the 1930s, can be seen as third way between liberal hyper-individualism on the one hand and totalitarian collectivism on the other:

“Personalism always resisted the absorption of the individual into the collectivity by asserting the inherent worth of the singular person. [...] Personalism’s insistence on personal freedom and responsibility, self-determination, creativity, and subjectivity all bear out this deep-seated resistance to collectivism. [...] From the beginning, personalism proclaimed in its own way the communitarian values of solidarity and inter-relation. [...] Where individualism hopes to find personal realization in self-interest, personalism asserts the need for relational openness to others, even as a condition for one’s own realization.”¹⁶

Personalism in 20th century history

Personalism gained momentum in the “Age of Extremes”¹⁷, especially from the 1930s on, when Europe was firmly in the grip of totalitarian regimes: Mussolini’s fascists ruled Italy since 1922, Stalin’s reign of terror began after Lenin’s death in 1924 and in 1933 Adolf Hitler and the Nazis got into power in Germany and immediately started installing a dictatorship. Furthermore, in France, many Catholic intellectuals had to rethink their views on the human and society after Pius XI condemned the *Action Française*, a far-right monarchist and nationalist political movement.¹⁸

How personalists shaped thoughts on democracy, the Catholic Church and Europe

Emmanuel Mounier, the young

Emmanuel Mounier became one of the most famous and influential French personalists of the 20th century.¹⁹ Born in 1905, he studied philosophy (after abandoning medical studies) first in his hometown Grenoble and later in Paris. He was deeply influenced by his teacher Jacques Chavelier (1882–1962), through whom he made acquaintance with Henri Bergson (1859–1941). In 1928, at the age of only 23, he got to know Catholic intellectual Jacques Maritain. In the intellectual circle to which both of them, as well as significant other figures, belonged the idea of the philosophy of personalism was born. Only four years later, in 1932, Mounier and some friends founded the journal *Esprit*, which became the central and most influential voice for personalism in the 1930s and 1940s. Besides Jacques Chavelier, Mounier was also deeply impressed by the (uncompleted)

¹⁶ Williams and Bengtsson, “Personalism.”

¹⁷ Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*.

¹⁸ Deweer, “The political theory,” 108–126.

¹⁹ De Tavernier, “The Historical Roots,” 367–374.

works of Charles Péguy (1873–1914). The young Mounier saw it as his and *Esprit*'s mission to complete Péguy's work and to spread his ideas of a social-revolutionary Christendom.²⁰ Although he criticised contemporary Marxist ideology, Mounier valued and integrated some Marxist insights into his personalist vision.²¹

It was these Catholic philosophers, along with the *Esprit* circle, that shaped Mounier's thinking and made him create his own vision of personalism and a personalist democracy and society. In his articles and his *Manifeste au service du personnalisme* (1936) he called for a "new renaissance" and a "personalist revolution". For Mounier, Christianity had betrayed its own roots through joining forces with the "bourgeois capitalism".²² Moreover, the authoritarian, fascist and Stalinist forces in Europe showed no respect to the individual human person. People were just part of the collective. Personalism wanted to establish a strict counterpart: The state had to exist for persons, not the other way round.²³ A society and its institutions must eliminate oppression, safeguard a margin of independence and make responsibility the foundation of life. Without a sense of responsibility, there can be no personalist democracy. Philosopher Dries Deweer sums it up as follows:

"Personalist democracy was, in essence, a political system that creates the framework of freedom, responsibility and justice from wherein every human being can find out what her vocation is in life and how to realize it so that she can develop into a fully fledged person. [...] Hence, democracy has an exalted mission, but at the same time, personalism was pervaded by the awareness of the fragility of such a system. That is why personalist democracy is also characterized by a fundamental distrust of power. All personalists warned that political power without boundaries lapses from support of the person into oppression."²⁴

The active and responsible citizen played a key role in Mounier's political thinking. The state is seen as a necessity in a personalist democracy, but also always as a risk, because it could accumulate too much power. The responsible citizen is the antidote to this. Another one is the principle of subsidiarity and federalism that many personalists shared.²⁵ That should guarantee bottom-up politics and "to keep politics close to the people by giving communities the greatest amount of political autonomy as possible".²⁶ The idea of federalism demystified nationalism

²⁰ Seeger, *Politik und Person*, 33–42.

²¹ De Tavernier, "The Historical Roots," 368–369.

²² Seeger, *Politik und Person*, 36.

²³ Williams and Bengtsson, "Personalism."

²⁴ Deweer, "The political theory," 122.

²⁵ De Tavernier, "The Historical Roots," 372–373.

²⁶ Deweer, "The political theory," 122.

and the idea of the sovereign nation state that had enormous and brutal consequences in Europe in the first half of the 20th century.²⁷

Emmanuel Mounier and *Esprit* tried to give a good example of the responsible and federal citizen. In 1948, he founded the organisation *Comité français d'échanges avec l'Allemagne nouvelle* in Paris to reconcile with Germany and strengthen the Résistance-born idea of a European federation.²⁸ Two years later, in 1950, Emmanuel Mounier died suddenly, at the young age of only 45. However, since his mid-20s, he had a great impact on French (and European) philosophy and political thinking, which extended beyond his death.²⁹

Jacques Maritain, the Catholic

Another highly influential personalist philosopher, especially for the Catholic Church, was Jacques Maritain, who also was part of the circle around Mounier and *Esprit*.³⁰ If Emmanuel Mounier was driven by his youth and urge to take action, the much older Maritain was driven by his Catholicism to which he converted at the age of 24 in 1906. He was deeply influenced by Saint Thomas Aquinas and tried to translate his theology and philosophy into the modern age.

In the 1920s, he was at times close to the *Action française* movement and was even seen as an “unofficial philosophical spokesman” of it.³¹ He distanced himself from the movement after it was condemned by the Pope. Maritain now began reshaping his philosophy. In the mid-1930s, he was invited to lecture in Canada and the US. His experiences in the United States had a significant impact on his thinking of Christianity and democracy.³² He remained there – even during the war – and began his philosophical examination of modernity and Catholicism. Maritain now pursued the goal of reconciling the idea of modern democracy with the teachings of the Gospel³³, a kind of personal “intellectual-political *aggiornamento*”.³⁴ His influential works include *Humanisme integral* (1936), *Christianisme et démocratie* (1943) and *Man and State* (1951). In *Christianisme et démocratie* he wrote: “democracy is linked to Christianity and that the democratic impulse has arisen in human history as the moral manifestation of the inspiration of the Gospel”.³⁵

²⁷ Deweer, “Personalisme,” 11–25.

²⁸ Strickmann, *L'Allemagne*, 227–242.

²⁹ De Tavernier, “The Historical Roots,” 373–374.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 374–377.

³¹ Müller, *Contesting Democracy*, 136.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Belardinelli, “Die politische Philosophie,” 247.

³⁴ Müller, *Contesting Democracy*, 136.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

Maritain's new linking of Catholicism and democracy had a tremendous impact: for the new political ideology of "Christian democracy" after 1945, for the Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948³⁶ and, finally, the Catholic church and the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Historian Sergio Belardinelli summed it up as follows: "Almost the entire Catholic leadership of the post-war period has been influenced to a greater or lesser extent by reading Maritain."³⁷ Nonetheless, Maritain continued to see himself as anti-liberal and throughout his life, he insisted on a theistic justification of democracy.³⁸

With its emphasis on the dialogue with the modern world, the acceptance of freedom of religion and conscience and the unconditional approval of the dignity of each human person, the Second Vatican Council eventually accepted viewpoints that Maritain had opened the door to years before.³⁹ During his three years as French ambassador to the Holy See (1945–1948), Maritain had become a close friend of Giovanni Montini.⁴⁰ After Montini became Pope Paul VI and continued the Second Vatican Council, he presented his old friend Maritain with the "Address to Men of Thought and Science" at the closing ceremony of the Council. Not only the Second Vatican Council was influenced by Maritain's philosophy, but also Paul VI. In his controversial last encyclical letter *Humanae vitae* (1968) Paul VI showed quite a personalist view, despite rejecting artificial contraception and any updating of papal teaching.⁴¹ Maritain died in 1973 at the age of 90 years.

Denis de Rougemont, the European

As mentioned above, the idea of subsidiarity and federalism played a key role in the political thinking of many personalists. During World War II and across occupied territories, from the Netherlands to Belgium, France and Poland, groups resisted Nazism and developed visions of a united Europe, largely independent of each other. But they all shared fundamental political (and partly personalist) convictions: democracy, fundamental human rights, pluralism, and above all, federalism.⁴² Federalism was seen as an effective antidote to all forms of totalitarianism and nationalism. Therefore, liberation from Nazism and the creation of a federal Europe, that would overcome the nation state, were often understood together. It was members of the Résistance like philosopher Alexandre Marc (1904–2000), who brought personalist convictions into the new European Federalist movement after the end of World War II. The *Union of European Federalists*

³⁶ Among historians it is to this day quite controversial if and how much influence Maritain really had on the Human Rights Declaration. For these discussions see Soto, *Thomistic Tradition*, 96–98.

³⁷ Belardinelli, "Die politische Philosophie," 250.

³⁸ Müller, "Die eigentlich katholische Entschärfung," 52.

³⁹ Above all in *Gaudium et Spes* and *Dignitatis Humanae*.

⁴⁰ Cagin, "Jacques Maritain," 60–75.

⁴¹ Ernesti, *Paul VI.*, 272.

⁴² Niess, *Die europäische Idee*; Spinelli, "European Union," 321–329.

(UEF) was founded in 1946. Its first president, Dutch historian Hendrik Brugmans (1906–1997), emphasised how much Marc's thought shaped his European, personalist and federal views.⁴³ In 1946, Brugmans published a book about another personalist thinker: *Denis de Rougemont en het Franse personalisme*.⁴⁴ He will be presented as the third example.

De Rougemont, born in Switzerland in 1906, was a personalist from the very beginning. He was one of the authors in the first issue of Emmanuel Mounier's *Esprit* in 1932 and published in it and in the other famous personalist journal *l'Ordre Nouveau* until 1939. In 1934, he published the book *Politique de la Personne*. After the beginning of the war, he served as Officer in the Swiss Army for a year but left Europe in 1940 and moved to the USA (not quite voluntarily).⁴⁵ Back in Europe it was aforementioned Alexandre Marc who told him of the *Union of European Federalists*.⁴⁶ Marc was the UEF's first Secretary-General. De Rougemont would now become a strong advocate for a federal, pluralistic and anti-national Europe, a "Europe of the regions".⁴⁷ He subsequently published many essays and books related to Europe and pleaded for its "unity in diversity".⁴⁸ In 1950 he founded the *Centre européen de la culture*.

However, the federalist movement had a personalist stamp not only through de Rougemont or Marc, but generally many members of European resistance groups, who now made up the European federalist movement, shared one "common source, the 'personalist movement', formed at first in Paris in 1932 (around *Esprit* and *l'Ordre Nouveau*) and which had spread over the rest of Europe".⁴⁹

At the UEF's first congress after its foundation, in Montreux in 1947, de Rougemont held an acclaimed speech on "L'attitude fédéraliste".⁵⁰ Before he came to speak about "six principles of Federalism", which he derived, among other things, from the example of the Swiss Confederation, he first covered the

⁴³ Niess, *Die europäische Idee*, 78. For an overview over Brugman's life: van Heerikhuizen, *Pioniers*, 41–68. See also de Rougemont, "The campaign," 335.

⁴⁴ Brugmans, *Denis de Rougemont*.

⁴⁵ He wrote an angry article about the occupation of Paris and was eventually discharged from the army. Altwegg, "Prophet."

⁴⁶ de Rougemont, "The campaign," 329–349.

⁴⁷ Conze, "Denis de Rougemont."

⁴⁸ To name a few: *Way of Federalism* (1940), *L'Europe en jeu* (1948), *Lettres aux députés européens* (1950), the Introduction to Beloff, Max, *Europe and the Europeans*. An international discussion with an introduction by D. de Rougemont, London 1957, pp. ix–xix, *Vingt-huit siècles d'Europe: la conscience européenne à travers les textes* (1961), *Fédéralisme culturel* (1965), *La Suisse ou l'Histoire d'un Peuple heureux* (1965).

⁴⁹ de Rougemont, "The campaign," 334.

⁵⁰ For the French version see: <https://www.unige.ch/rougemont/articles/1946-1948/ddr19471000nef>.

Parts of the speech were published in German: de Rougemont, "Die sechs Prinzipien," 1–8.

personalist roots of federalism: “human beings have a dual responsibility: on the one hand, towards their own unique vocation, and on the other hand, towards the community within which they exercise that vocation.”⁵¹ Therefore, humans are first and foremost *persons*. They are “both free and committed, both autonomous and supportive”.⁵² They live in the “tension between two poles: the individual and the general”.⁵³ For Denis de Rougemont the federalist system corresponds best to human beings as persons, “who are both free and committed, living in the tension between autonomy and solidarity.”⁵⁴ The most dangerous antidote to federalism (especially in the 20th century), and ultimately the person, is totalitarianism. Totalitarianism stands against anything that federalism supports:

“All totalitarian systems are based on the hegemony of a party or a nation, on the spirit of the system, on the crushing of minorities and opposition, on the forced unification of diversity, on hatred of living complexities [...] Totalitarianism is simple and rigid, like war, like death. Federalism is complex and flexible, like peace, like life...”⁵⁵

In contrast, federalism respects the dignity of every unique person, it dismisses the hegemony and dominion of one group or nation, encourages diversity and respects minorities.⁵⁶ Following Denis de Rougemont, there were these two fundamental approaches at that time. One is a “threat” (totalitarianism), the other a “hope” (federalism).⁵⁷ Thus, at the end, he calls for a kind of “grass-roots-federalism”⁵⁸: Not governments and those in power can establish a European federation, but only the peoples and responsible persons and communities in Europe.

As we know today, a European federation did not become a reality. The *Union of European Federalists* advocates for it until today. Later in life, Denis de Rougemont not only advocated European federalism but also environmental protection. He died in 1985 in Geneva.

These three examples – the young Emmanuel Mounier, the Catholic Jacques Maritain and the European Denis de Rougemont – illustrate the enormous influence

⁵¹ de Rougemont, “L’attitude fédéraliste,”.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ The six principles are: “a) renouncement of all hegemony; b) renouncement of all esprit de système; c) safeguarding of minorities; d) preservation of the qualities of each federated entity; e) ‘Love of complexity’”

For this summary and the historical context of the congress see Gouzy, “The saga,” 12–46.

⁵⁷ de Rougemont, “L’attitude fédéraliste,”.

⁵⁸ Frank Niess calls it “Graswurzel-Föderalismus” in Niess, *Die europäische Idee*, 109.

of personalism on the intellectual scene in Europe from the 1930s onwards. However, personalism did not just remain confined to theoretical discourse. It had specific practical political effects after the end of the war.

How personalist thoughts shaped politics in Europe after 1945

After 1945 a “reinvention of conservatism” occurred in many Western European states.⁵⁹ A new political ideology was born, the so-called “Christian democracy”, which rejected a too powerful and totalitarian state as well as pure individualism and radical liberalism. Christian democracy emphasised the dignity of the human person. It was personalism translated into practical politics.

The possible influence that personalist thinking had on the UN Human Rights Declaration has already been mentioned. Another example would be the constitution of the new West German state. In response to the crimes and terror of National Socialism, the very first article of the new constitution says in an undoubtedly personalist manner: “Human dignity shall be inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all state authority.”

Many new Christian-democratic parties rose to power in the 1950s, like the CDU in West Germany, the *Democrazia Cristiana* in Italy or the *Mouvement républicain populaire* in France. Christian-democratic politicians, through their personalist roots, wanted to guarantee freedom and responsibility of every person and to rebuild modern welfare state. Three of the most prominent to name here were West Germany’s first chancellor Konrad Adenauer, Italy’s first post-war prime minister Alcide De Gasperi and French foreign minister Robert Schuman. All three were Catholics, very sceptical of nationalism and came from European border regions.⁶⁰ Adenauer came from Cologne, which was at the Western edge of the German Empire; Schuman was born in Luxembourg because his French father fled out of Lothringen after it became German in 1871 and De Gasperi came from the Trentino Region, which belonged to Austria until the end of World War I; he studied in Vienna and was member of the Austrian Imperial Council before 1918. All three were deeply influenced by the partly brutal homogenisations of the “late” nation states Italy and Germany at the end of the 19th century. Therefore, and because of their supra- or anti-national Catholic religion, which opened up to modern democracy after 1945 (thanks to Maritain), national sovereignty was not a value in itself to them; on the contrary, both World Wars had shown the destructive power of nationalism and totalitarianism. The important role of their Catholicism for their pro-European orientation was already acknowledged back then.⁶¹ It comes with little surprise that they played a key role in building a united Europe in the 1950s and are remembered today as “founding fathers” of

⁵⁹ Moyn, “Personalism,” 87.

⁶⁰ See for this paragraph: Müller, *Contesting Democracy*, 141–143. See also Kohler, *Alcide De Gasperi*, 111.

⁶¹ Kohler, *Alcide De Gasperi*, 134.

the EU. All three agreed on the idea of a more integrated and united Europe to secure a peaceful future of the continent.

A glimpse into his thoughts on Europe, democracy and the human person, can be found in Konrad Adenauer's four-part memoirs. Already at the very beginning of the first volume, he wrote about his "hope" after 1945, the "United States of Europe".⁶² He emphasised that he was German but admitted that "I have always been European and felt that way."⁶³ Following his own view, a unification of Europe was his political goal since the 1920s. For Adenauer it was now absolutely necessary, if Germany wanted to live in peace with its neighbours, especially France: "I saw the future United States of Europe as the best and most lasting safeguard for Germany's western neighbours."⁶⁴

Few pages later, Adenauer reflected on the preconditions of National Socialism, his view of the human person and the role of state. One can directly read the personalist foundation from these lines:

"The power of the state finds both its limits and its orientation in the dignity, freedom, and independence of the individual. However, personal freedom does not mean boundlessness and arbitrariness. It obliges everyone to always be mindful of the responsibility that each individual bears for their fellow human beings and for the entire people when exercising their freedom."⁶⁵

So, personalist views and ideas (popularised through *Esprit* and thinkers like Mounier, Maritain and de Rougemont) had immediate impact on politics in Western Europe after 1945. The examples of Adenauer, De Gasperi and Schuman may show politicians of an older generation (Adenauer was 73 years old when he became chancellor, and 87 when he stepped down), but not only were they Catholic and European, they also proved that they had remained young at heart. In a later stage of their lives, they came to a new and fresh conclusion: to establish a never-seen-before integration of the European states and peoples. What does all this mean for us today and for life in the 21st century? Can we still find the *person* in today's world?

Personalism in the authoritarian wave of the 2020s? How human dignity can prevail in the 21st century

Today, the idea of the dignity of the human person is at stake like maybe never before since 1945. Geographically, economically and ideologically, Europe is

⁶² Adenauer, *Erinnerungen 1945–1953*, 35.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 39–40.

surrounded by powers for whom the dignity of the individual is not worth much. Russia has been waging an inhumane war of aggression against Ukraine for years now. Thousands of people have died on both sides, and countless Ukrainian children have been abducted to Russia. Everything and everyone is subordinated to Putin's imperialist-collectivist historical narrative.⁶⁶ In China's communist-capitalist and digital surveillance state, there is also no room for the free development of the individual person.⁶⁷ The oppression of minorities and any opposition demonstrates a disregard for individual rights and human dignity.⁶⁸ Everything must be subordinated to the collective and to economic success. Finally, we see an authoritarian surge in the USA under Donald Trump.⁶⁹ The individual person seems to get crushed. No humanity can be expected from the government, on the contrary, what remains of the welfare state is being dismantled and human dignity seems to be valuable only if it is white, Christian-nationalist and born in the United States (but even then, lives may be at risk, as the killings of US citizens in Minneapolis in January 2026 have shown).

So, what about Europe? The nationalist and authoritarian trend is also growing stronger here.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, it may be Europeans and the European Union that must carry the personalist torch today. Of course, we cannot simply tackle today's challenges with philosophical insights that are 80 years old and partly Catholic shaped.⁷¹ However, the example of personalism and its historical context of origin in quite dark times can be an inspiration for today. At least an inspiration to raise questions about how we want to live with one another in our societies. It may sound simple, but much would be gained if Europe repeatedly reminded itself and the international community in a credible manner of the dignity of the individual. German chancellor Friedrich Merz recently drew a line between Europe and the MAGA movement's culture war. At the Munich Security Conference 2026 he said: "Freedom of expression ends here in Germany when words oppose human dignity and the Basic Law."⁷² One could add that this is not only the case in Germany but in most European countries. The libertarian understanding of "freedom" in the US, above all in digital spaces, is very different from the European (and the personalist) one. Digital spaces and social media platforms are an illustrative example: Emmanuel Mounier and his idea of a personalist democracy stressed the need of active and responsible citizens for a functioning democracy. Today, there is a growing number of surveys that suggest that a high usage of social media platforms can lead citizens to passivity, loneliness and, in the end,

⁶⁶ Nielsen, "Putin's Use and Abuse of History."; Bluhm, "The Ideology."

⁶⁷ Qiang, "The Road."

⁶⁸ Müller and Pfaff, "China am Pranger."

⁶⁹ Applebaum, "Trump's 'American Dominance'."; Rauch, "Yes It's Fascism."

⁷⁰ Heinö, "TIMBRO Authoritarian Populism Index 2024."

⁷¹ Walter Schultz explores Jacques Maritain's significance for the 21st century. See Schultz, *Jacques Maritain in the 21st Century*.

⁷² Merz, "Speech 13 February 2026."

even political radicalisation.⁷³ Unregulated platforms and big US-tech-companies can therefore endanger the European liberal democracies and with it the dignity of the human person.⁷⁴ Personalism reminds us to stay active and get involved in the community. It is a core conviction of this philosophical movement that is still relevant today.

Ironically, the non-democratic and just partly liberal Catholic Church could be an ally in today's challenges, not least because also within the Church there are Neo-Traditionalist, authoritarian and far-right tendencies that gain more influence (and that find powerful political partners in far-right figures like US-Vice President Vance).⁷⁵ Fortunately, Pope Leo XIV recently suggested a much broader understanding of being "pro-life" that includes being against death penalty and against inhumane treatments of immigrants, and not just the rejection of abortion.⁷⁶ One could add also that regulated digital platforms, a responsible management of AI developments or fighting climate change are necessary aspects of being "pro-life", as it refers to the unique persons and lives of the younger and not-yet-born generations. Although the Church is still an authoritative institution, Jacques Maritain was an example of finding links between the long and old tradition of Catholicism and modern democracies, especially regarding the dignity of every human person. The Church itself must not only deepen its dialogue with democratic states or societies but also its reflections on democracy as a personalist way of life. Both the Church and liberal democracies must safeguard human dignity.

Finally, as the Catholic Church discusses decentralisation and synodality since Pope Francis's pontificate, the European Union should, too, strengthen its own institutional structure and nature in a more federal way as Denis de Rougemont and the European federalists have demanded and still demand. If the EU wants to tackle the challenges of the 21st century successfully and if it is serious about human dignity, personal freedom and responsible community and solidarity, more integration and cooperation is inevitable.⁷⁷ However, even today the European Union can be powerful and ready to act, as the social media example shows. In 2022, the European Union introduced the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA) that shall protect EU citizens' basic rights in digital

⁷³ Tirkkonen and Tietjens, "Loneliness and radicalization."; Langenkamp, "Linking social deprivation."; Hollewell and Longpré, "Radicalization in the Social Media Era."; Cox, Hammond, and Grace, "How Social Media."

⁷⁴ Radsch, "Why Europe's Resistance."

⁷⁵ Signer, "Far-right conservative Catholics."

⁷⁶ Fouda, "Pope Leo XIV."

⁷⁷ Vinocur, "Forget the far right."

spaces and, eventually, Europe's democracies.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, European governments *and* citizens must develop a broader European, not just national, consciousness and public, if they want to uphold the continent's personalist heritage. As personalism as well as federalism respect the individual person and minorities, and rejects the hegemony of a group or nation, Europe's diversity would be preserved. Personalism can guarantee that there would be neither a selfish and scattered "Europe of Nations" nor a uniformed and non-pluralistic European nationalism in the future. In this federal sense, too, personalism can be a philosophy not only of the past but also of the present and the future.

Outlook

Maybe it is especially a task and challenge for the young, the Catholics and the Europeans to insist on some fundamental personalist insights, that are still relevant today: the balance between individual freedom, community and state as well as plurality and diversity on the one hand and unity and integration on the other; responsibility for oneself, for one another and for society. Therefore, due to growing autocratic tendencies and in times of the partly destructive forces of social media, of simplification and quick outrage it would be very important to remember one final aspect that sums up personalism in one word and that Denis de Rougemont considered to be typically European. It seems to be forgotten these days: the passion for differentiation.⁷⁹ Today's world seems to lack differentiation, but it is hardly only "black" or "white" as social media-bubbles too often suggest. Reality usually is much "greyer". Political conflicts and debates are not like sport events, where you have to choose between two "sides". AI is neither exclusively dangerous nor humanity's final salvation. Fighting climate change is not a decision between destroying the planet or destroying prosperity. Migrants are neither criminals nor saints, but above all human persons. Differentiation must not be forgotten in today's societies. Young people, Catholics (in cooperation with non-Catholics and non-believers) and Europeans should uphold this personalist virtue of differentiating in an increasingly simplifying world. It is not just "either...or" but most often: "as well as".

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⁷⁸ Radsch, "Why Europe's Resistance." An overview of DSA- and DMA-based actions against Big Tech companies in 2025 can be found here: <https://www.euronews.com/next/2025/12/17/eu-takes-on-big-tech-here-are-the-top-actions-regulators-have-taken-in-2025>.

⁷⁹ Kirsch, *Europazweifel*, 218–220.

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PART IV: YOUNG CATHOLICS IN EUROPE BETWEEN SOCIETAL CHALLENGES AND INTERCONTINENTAL HORIZONS

CONSCIOUSLY NOT OLD-FASHIONED: THE COURAGEOUS FUTURE OF THEOLOGICAL ETHICS IN DIALOGUE WITH THE BIOSCIENCES

Adam Widera

Abstract

This chapter argues for a theological ethics that approaches the modern biosciences with openness and a willingness to engage in dialogue. In an age in which biological explanations increasingly shape public understandings of the human being, theological interpretations are often regarded as outdated or irrelevant. The chapter demonstrates that recent developments in evolutionary biology — particularly systemic and relational approaches — open up new and sometimes unexpected points of connection for interdisciplinary dialogue. Within this context, interdisciplinarity is understood not as a simple exchange of information but as a long-term process of mutual translation, learning, and critical reflection between disciplines. Theological ethics thus operates within a dynamic field of tension between tradition and innovation: it draws on the resources of the Christian tradition while remaining attentive and responsive to new scientific insights. Finally, the guiding triad “young – Catholic – European” is interpreted as describing intellectual attitudes that foster critical reflection, dialogical openness, and responsible ethical orientation in ongoing conversation with the biosciences.

Introduction

To be young and consciously Catholic in Europe today means finding one’s bearings amid a plurality of voices: religious traditions coexist with cultural trends, scientific insights, and technological visions of the future. This tension-filled coexistence shapes the everyday lives of young Catholics and the space in which faith is lived. It is not merely a threat but a task. Those who take faith seriously are not called to an apologetic retreat, but to a courageous and constructive dialogue. A generation of young theological ethicists, in particular, stands within the field of tension between tradition and future, religious experience and empirical research.

Biology, above all, shapes public discourse and frequently frames anthropological questions in genetically reductionist or religion-critical ways. As a result, theological-ethical perspectives are quickly dismissed as outdated. This makes theological ethics even more urgent in a “biologized” age that not only produces new knowledge but also transforms our understanding of life, identity, embodiment, and sustainability. Where scientific paradigms increasingly influence social normativity, a “young” theological ethic is required: capable of critical judgment and

genuinely open to dialogue, without fear of appearing old-fashioned. It is called to challenge reductionisms, to integrate relational, moral, and religious dimensions of human existence, and to open new spaces of orientation.

This chapter attempts to address this concern. First, it identifies the most significant obstacles to dialogue between theological ethics and the biosciences. It then traces paradigm shifts in modern biology, highlighting the shift away from gene-centred models toward relational and systemic approaches. Against this background, the chapter outlines the discourse-promoting basic functions of both domains: the biosciences as an empirical learning landscape and theology as a critical-solidarity companion to biological disciplines. Finally, interdisciplinarity is interpreted in a differentiated manner and thus understood essentially as a long-term process of translation, which is summarized in the triad of attitudes “being young—Catholic—European” and ultimately describes a theological ethic that mediates between fidelity to tradition and openness, normative commitment and willingness to learn, as well as scientific rationality and religious perspectives on meaning.

Outlook: Three major hurdles in the dialogue between theological ethics and biosciences

The need for interdisciplinary dialogue between theological ethics and the biosciences arises from the insight that questions about the origin, meaning, and moral orientation of human beings can only be adequately explored through the interaction of different perspectives of knowledge.¹ At the same time, such dialogue is complicated by historically grown tensions and epistemological differences. Against this background, three fundamental areas of conflict become apparent whose awareness is crucial to clarify the prerequisites for constructive interdisciplinary exchange.

¹ This article focuses exclusively on interdisciplinarity. The *transdisciplinary perspective*—understood as an approach that goes beyond collaboration between scientific disciplines and involves non-scientific actors and practical forms of knowledge from politics, business, culture, and civil society in the joint production of knowledge—is deliberately excluded here in order to place the analytical spotlight squarely on the methodological, epistemic, and cooperative structures of interdisciplinary research.

(1) First, it should be emphasized that the public debate is shaped by two opposing yet structurally similar positions: *creationist movements*² and *New Atheism*.³ Both reduce the complexity of scientific and theological discussions and show little interest in genuine dialogue. This polarization is further reinforced by debates on naturalism. While methodological naturalism provides a reasonable framework for scientific inquiry, *scientistic-ontological naturalism* claims that all intellectual, cultural, and religious phenomena can be fully reduced to material processes.⁴ Such reductionism narrows our understanding of humanity but also denies theological interpretations epistemic legitimacy from the outset.

(2) In addition, structural asymmetries between the two fields exacerbate the problem: theological ethics must engage with scientific findings, whereas the biosciences can largely operate independently of theological questions. This *asymmetry of mutual dependence* risks marginalizing theological perspectives or encouraging their uncritical adaptation to biological narratives. The physicist Jürgen Audretsch (1942–2018) interprets this one-sidedness as the result of a historical process of emancipation beginning in the early modern period, during which the natural sciences deliberately detached themselves from philosophical and theological claims in order to establish an exclusively empirical account of reality.⁵

(3) Finally, hermeneutical difficulties constitute a particularly serious challenge, since language itself is a major source of misunderstanding. As Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) observed, identical terms can function within different *language games* and thus generate distinct semantic frameworks.⁶ This also applies to the sciences, each of which employs its own specialized language. Thomas Kuhn (1922–1996) understands such specialized languages as part of a paradigm, which in turn encompasses the common framework of thought and research

² Creationism is not a uniform movement but comprises several distinct positions. *Young Earth Creationism* interprets the biblical creation account literally, assumes a universe that is only about 10,000 years old, and rejects evolution entirely. *Old Earth Creationism* accepts geological time scales and holds that basic forms of life were created at different points in Earth's history; limited variation within species is allowed, while large-scale evolutionary developments are excluded. By contrast, the *Intelligent Design* movement presents itself as a scientific approach that acknowledges microevolutionary processes but attributes complex biological structures to an "intelligent cause," rejecting chance-based macroevolutionary explanations. By deliberately leaving the identity of this cause unspecified, *Intelligent Design* claims scientific legitimacy.

³ This designation refers to a predominantly English-speaking group of authors who have gained broad public attention since the early 2000s. The movement is characterized by a strongly polemical critique of religion that —unlike earlier atheistic traditions—draws heavily on scientific and evolutionary-biological arguments and is directed primarily against fundamentalist-creationist forms of Christianity.

⁴ Illies, *Philosophische Anthropologie*, 33–34.

⁵ Audretsch, "Der Blick auf das Ganze," 178–179.

⁶ Körtner, "Schöpfung, Kosmologie und Evolution," 68.

within a scientific community: it includes fundamental assumptions, methods, questions, and central concepts. Within this framework, specialized language also acquires its specific meanings, since the terms used are shaped by common theoretical and methodological foundations.⁷ When scientific concepts are transferred unreflectively into other discourses, their meanings shift and hybrid language games emerge, blurring the boundaries between the natural sciences, philosophy, and theology. In particular, the uncritical use of biological terminology in philosophical-theological contexts can implicitly convey worldviews that are not easily compatible with those frameworks. A sensitive awareness of language, semantics, and context is therefore a fundamental prerequisite for any meaningful interdisciplinary dialogue.⁸

Changing paradigms: biology as a space for dialogue

Biology does not prove to be a domain of continuous accumulation, but rather a field shaped by paradigm shifts that repeatedly transform its interpretive frameworks of living beings. From early formulations of evolutionary theory through gene-centred reductionism to the Extended Synthesis, a development can be traced away from linear causalities toward relational, systemic, and multilevel models of life. This newly gained openness makes the biosciences particularly receptive to interdisciplinary dialogue and opens spaces for theological-ethical reflection. While their empirical insights cannot establish norms, they provide indispensable knowledge about the conditions of human existence. Conversely, theological ethics accompanies the biosciences by making their methodological limits visible, challenging reductionist theoretical dead ends, and articulating questions of meaning, personhood, and responsibility.

*How biology constantly reinvented itself: evolutionary theory in transition*⁹

Knowledge of the history of biology is of central importance for interdisciplinary dialogue, because it makes visible that biological concepts and insights are historically shaped and culturally embedded.¹⁰ If, moreover, Thomas Kuhn has shown that scientific knowledge does not grow in calm continuity but unfolds through upheavals and paradigm shifts, it becomes clear that in such moments not only the knowledge of a discipline changes, but also the way it perceives reality, formulates its questions, and interprets its findings.¹¹ This historical awareness opens the space for a dialogue between biology and theological ethics.

⁷ Mühlhölzer, "Thomas S. Kuhn," 387–388.

⁸ Ibid. 68–70.

⁹ This subchapter basically follows the explanations in my previous article, "Bioscientific Foundation," but has been slightly modified in places for specific reasons.

See Widera, "Foundation," 213–217.

¹⁰ Haudel, *Theologie und Naturwissenschaft*, 42.

¹¹ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

It is through these paradigm shifts that biology has become an integrated scientific field. Its development resembles less a continuous flow than a sequence of sudden openings—moments in which previously separate fragments fall into place within a larger framework and new syntheses become possible. The history of biological theory can be read as a series of epistemic readjustments, from the emergence of evolutionary thinking through its extensions in genetics and behavioural biology to the systemic approaches of more recent times. The biosciences strive to understand living organisms in the complex interdependence of genetics, development, behaviour, environment, and culture.

Well into the mid-nineteenth century, biology existed less as a coherent science than as a mosaic of separate disciplines whose development proceeded with little mutual reference. What was missing was an overarching theoretical framework capable of integrating the empirical observations into a broader conceptual whole. Only with the evolutionary theory formulated in 1858 by Charles Darwin (1809–1882) and Alfred Wallace (1823–1913) did such a unifying framework emerge—one that linked external contextual factors (such as the geographical distribution of species) with internal organizational principles (such as morphology).¹² This theory provided the intellectual infrastructure on which a series of scientific syntheses of the twentieth century could be built.

In the 1930s, the Modern Synthesis brought together evolutionary theory with findings from genetics, systematics, population biology,¹³ and palaeontology, thereby creating a unified theoretical framework of evolution. From the 1950s onward, behavioural biology established itself as an independent discipline, integrating organismal behaviour into this explanatory model. Out of this development emerged sociobiology in the 1970s, which rejected the previously widespread idea of species selection in favour of a strictly individual-based model of selection.¹⁴ This shift was guided by the *theory of the selfish gene*,¹⁵ from which

¹² Renn, *The Evolution of Knowledge*, 126.

¹³ It is a subfield of evolutionary biology that investigates the distribution and change of genetic variation within and between populations. It examines how evolutionary forces—such as mutation, selection, genetic drift, and gene flow—shape the frequencies of *alleles*, that is, different variants of a gene that occur at the same location in the genome and can produce different expressions of a trait.

¹⁴ With a deliberate distancing from the hitherto fashionable behaviourism, sociobiology sought to explain social behaviour as the product of evolutionary processes shaped by natural selection at the level of individuals and their genes. In contrast to behaviourist approaches, which focused primarily on learning, conditioning, and environmental control, sociobiology emphasized the evolutionary and genetic foundations of behaviour. While highly influential, the field also provoked intense controversy, particularly regarding the biological explanation of human social behaviour and its ethical and political implications.

¹⁵ According to Richard Dawkins (b. 1941), organisms are essentially vehicles for their genes. Over the course of evolution, genes have produced increasingly complex “survival machines” to enhance their own reproductive success. The metaphor of the “selfish gene”

a genuinely gene-centred paradigm arose in which genes came to be seen as the primary drivers of evolution.

Yet it was this theoretical radicalism that led to an epistemological narrowing of the biosciences: the dominance of gene reductionism caused evolutionary biology and developmental biology¹⁶ to appear, for decades, as largely separate and unrelated fields. In developmental biology, it was long far from obvious that embryonic ontogeny and evolutionary history might illuminate one another in reciprocal ways. While developmental researchers focused on short-term, individual-level processes, evolutionary biologists investigated long-term dynamics at the population level. As a result, development remained within evolutionary theory a largely opaque “black box”—an epistemic space between the genotype as the carrier of information and the phenotype as the organism’s visible form.¹⁷

In parallel with this narrowing of the biological perspective, theoretical approaches to cultural evolution emerged that extended human behaviour beyond the genetic level and held the potential to open the reductionist paradigm. These models emphasized that social learning processes, traditions, and symbolic practices constitute autonomous, in some cases more rapidly acting evolutionary mechanisms that cannot be explained by genetics alone.¹⁸ As early as 1981, Luigi Cavalli-Sforza (1922–2018) and Marcus Feldman (b. 1942) developed quantitative models of cultural transmission;¹⁹ in 1985, Robert Boyd (b. 1948) and Peter Richerson (b. 1943) conceptualized culture as a second mode of inheritance alongside genetic inheritance.²⁰ Despite their theoretical innovative power, approaches to cultural evolution remained largely marginalized within the biosciences. In a research landscape strongly shaped by gene-centred explanations, concepts of cultural evolution were often regarded as peripheral, overly speculative, or beyond the proper domain of biological inquiry.²¹

thus refers to the genetic imperative to generate as many intraspecific copies of itself as possible.

See Buskes, *Evolutionär denken*, 91.

¹⁶ Developmental biology is the area of biology that studies the processes by which organisms grow, differentiate, and acquire their form across the life cycle—from the earliest embryonic stages to maturity. It investigates how genetic programs, cellular interactions, and environmental factors jointly shape the emergence and organization of tissues, organs, and overall body structure.

¹⁷ Lange, *Evolutionstheorie im Wandel*, 45.

¹⁸ Sumser, *Evolution der Ethik*, 30.

¹⁹ Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman, *Cultural Transmission and Evolution*.

²⁰ Boyd and Richerson, *Culture and the Evolutionary Process*.

²¹ The limited reception of cultural-evolutionary approaches within the biosciences can be explained in part by the long-standing intellectual dominance of Richard Dawkins. His gene-centred understanding of evolution shaped the assumption that cultural phenomena can ultimately be reduced to genetic selection processes. In particular, the *theory of the extended phenotype* (1982), which interprets behaviour and organism-produced artifacts

This situation did not change until the mid-1990s, when the introduction of expanded synthesis initiated a paradigm shift within the life sciences that is significant for the present day. The previously dominant gene-centrism gradually lost plausibility as empirical evidence mounted for the ambiguity of genetic information: identical genes can generate different phenotypes (*principle of plasticity*), while different genes can nonetheless produce the same phenotype (*principle of robustness*). At the same time, it became increasingly clear that genes do not operate in isolation during embryonic ontogeny but function within a network of continuous interactions involving proteins, cells, tissues, and the broader environment.²² Against this background, a systems-biological approach emerged that increasingly dissolved traditional boundaries between genetic, developmental, and cultural processes. A seminal contribution was made by Eva Jablonka (b. 1952) and Marion Lamb (b. 1943) who—drawing on the framework of *multi-level selection theory*—identified three additional modes of inheritance beyond the genetic one: an epigenetic–developmental pathway, behavioural transmission, and symbolic inheritance, the latter occurring exclusively in humans.²³ With this, the classical gene-centrism came under pressure, as evolutionary change could now be understood as the outcome of multilayered interaction systems spanning various organizational and temporal scales (from genes to cultural symbol systems).

Within this expanded perspective, two concepts prove especially significant. First, *niche construction theory* demonstrates that organisms actively modify their environments rather than merely responding passively to selective pressures. Second, the *model of inclusive inheritance* highlights the importance of cultural transmission—whether through learned behaviour or, in humans, through the symbolic mediation of language and writing.²⁴ It builds an unmistakable bridge to the humanities: symbolic meanings, practices, and values are transmitted and continually transformed across generations, functioning as a connective tissue between past, present, and future.²⁵ They shape identity, norms, and social behaviour, and they generate the imaginative symbolic worlds through which human communities culturally construct their own ecological niches.²⁶ In this extended

as direct effects of genetic programs, contributed to a biologically reductionist view of culture. As a result, culture tended to appear primarily as a subordinate extension of genetic causality, marginalizing alternative, more pluralistic theories of culture within the evolutionary-biological mainstream for decades.

See Widera, “Foundation,” 220–221.

²² Lange, *Evolutionstheorie im Wandel*, 90–91.

²³ Jablonka and Lamb, *Evolution in Four Dimensions*.

²⁴ Danchin et al., “Beyond DNA”.

²⁵ Lange, *Evolutionstheorie im Wandel*, 90.

²⁶ Renn, *The Evolution of Knowledge*, 328.

view, evolution no longer appears as a purely genetic process but rather as a dynamic interplay of biological, ecological, and cultural factors—a complex network of co-evolving levels.

In view of this new paradigm shift in the biosciences, the asymmetry of mutual dependence (discussed above) seems to be slowly softening, and biologists are becoming increasingly interested in approaches from the humanities and cultural studies. For example, biologist Jochen Oehler (1942–2017), a proven initiator of numerous interdisciplinary conferences, advocates overcoming the traditional separation between the natural sciences and the humanities. For him, this means that evolutionary perspectives must also be incorporated into disciplines within psychology, sociology, political science, philosophy, literary studies, art studies, and theology to jointly pursue the research project of a holistic view of human existence. The increase in conferences of this kind speaks in favour of this, in his view.²⁷ In this regard, a “young” theological ethics faces the task of decisively offering itself as an interesting discussion partner. This presupposes that theological ethics makes its methodological prerequisites and theoretical foundations transparent and at the same time reflects on the compatibility of its arguments with scientific perspectives. However, such an opening does not mean renouncing its own claims. Precisely because of its tradition-rich reflection on anthropology, responsibility, and horizons of meaning, it can contribute independent impulses to interdisciplinary debates. Against the backdrop of evolutionary biological interpretations of human beings, the question arises as to how biological explanations of human behaviour can be reconciled with normative orientations without one absorbing the other. Theological ethics could use this area of tension to its advantage by taking scientific insights seriously while keeping in mind the cultural, historical, and symbolic dimensions of human existence.

Biology as a learning landscape for theological ethics

Theological ethics finds itself, in the face of rapidly expanding bioscientific knowledge, in an unfamiliar yet necessary role: the role of the learner. Anyone who wants to engage in theological ethics today must also be prepared to evaluate their own established patterns of thought in light of biological findings and adapt them if necessary. The interdisciplinary dialogue thus becomes not merely a supplementary backdrop but a constitutive field of learning capable of shaping the further development of theological ethics in a lasting way. This becomes particularly evident in the interdisciplinarity characteristic of modern biosciences. *Evolutionary theory* functions as their unifying foundation without erasing the distinct methodological logics of the participating disciplines. A paradigmatic example of this is the project of *multi-level selection theory*, which systemically intertwines molecular-biological and biochemical perspectives with ethological

²⁷ Oehler, “Einführung.”

and cultural-evolutionary approaches. The model of inclusive inheritance embedded therein also opens up new and hitherto little-explored paths to the humanities. Theological ethics is challenged to receive these impulses attentively and receptively, to accompany them critically, and to interpret them constructively.

At the same time, bioscientific claims rest on empirically grounded epistemic domains that are deliberately methodologically delimited. Biologists may frame their theories as autonomous domains that can be evaluated strictly by empirical means. Theological ethics, by contrast, cannot generate such “materially intrinsic” contributions; its competence lies instead in the normative analysis of empirical findings and in their reflection through theological presuppositions.²⁸ In considering the human being, biosciences offer indispensable insights into the empirical conditions governing personal acts of self-realization. On the one hand, biological constitution forms a fundamental reference point for moral action.²⁹ On the other hand, it provides the necessary knowledge regarding the conditions under which human capacities for action take shape.³⁰ Although biosciences themselves cannot establish ethical norms, they supply the essential understanding of the structures within which normative orientations can meaningfully be applied.³¹ In my opinion, this interplay between empirical conditioning and ethical interpretation gives rise to insights that can be condensed into three dimensions of human existence and serve as guiding perspectives for a theological-ethical anthropology.

(1) *Relationality* describes the fundamental embeddedness of life within networks of mutual relatedness. Human existence never unfolds in isolation but always within ecological and sociocultural contexts. A theological ethics that takes responsibility and the preservation of creation seriously must therefore not only recognize these relational constellations but make them the starting point of its reflection.

(2) *Formability* refers to the plasticity of biological processes. Developmental biology and niche-construction theory demonstrate that biological reality is not strictly deterministic but is shaped through open possibilities and environmental relations. In this way, the field of human self-formation becomes transparent from a biological perspective and opens a resonance space for theological questions concerning freedom, responsibility, and the achievement of authentic personhood.

²⁸ Knapp, *Soziobiologie und Moralthologie*, 24.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁰ Zelinka, *Normativität der Natur – Natur der Normativität*, 41.

³¹ Knapp, *Soziobiologie und Moralthologie*, 20–21.

(3) *Symbolic power* highlights that language, culture, and tradition are not mere by-products of evolutionary processes. Rather, they constitute the symbolic space within which human beings interpret the world, share values, and create meaning. Here, nature and culture intertwine in a manner that reveals what is genuinely human: the capacity for meaning-making, value orientation, and transcendence.

Taken together, these dimensions form an image of the human being that is biologically grounded, culturally shaped, and normatively oriented. For theological ethics, the challenge—and simultaneously the great opportunity—lies in productively engaging this complex constellation. It will remain viable only insofar as it is willing to interrogate itself critically in the light of biological insights, to sharpen its own foundations, and, in a spirit of receptive openness, to continue the dialogue among the natural sciences, the humanities, and theological interpretation.

The critical-solidary role of theological ethics

The central task of theological ethics is then to critically and sympathetically accompany biological practice. Bioscientific knowledge never arises without preconditions, but always within philosophically influenced horizons of mediation: According to Kuhn, scientific knowledge never arises without preconditions, but always within a paradigm that determines which questions are asked and which methods are used.³² Data is therefore not simply recorded, but collected, selected, and interpreted using theory-guided methods.³³ Every scientific research method is an expression of a particular “perspective,” i.e., a conscious commitment to a viewpoint that simultaneously determines what may be considered relevant and what may not. Accordingly, biological knowledge always remains a limited, a posteriori approximation of reality, which is essentially shaped by processes of observation and interpretation.

The growing degree of specialization in bioscientific disciplines is not problematic in itself. Only when biological findings are overloaded with ideologically narrowed horizons of meaning or presented as comprehensive interpretations of human beings does an ethical need for action arise.³⁴ Theological ethics takes on a decidedly methodical and critical mediating role here. It asks questions about the uniqueness of human perspectives on experience, draws attention to the categorical limits of scientific statements, and can thus support bioscientific research in its own methodological reflexivity (especially regarding anthropological questions).³⁵

³² Mühlhölzer, “Thomas S. Kuhn,” 387.

³³ Demmer, *Moraltheologische Methodenlehre*, 193.

³⁴ Zelinka, *Normativität der Natur – Natur der Normativität*, 45.

³⁵ Demmer, *Moraltheologische Methodenlehre*, 193.

When theological ethics speaks of human beings, it does so in a different frame of reference than the biosciences. For theological ethics, the personal dimension of human beings is paramount, understood from the perspective of their life goals and existential self-interpretation, which cannot be reduced to biological functionality. The biosciences cannot answer those questions about identity, meaning, and the uniqueness of human life that people repeatedly ask and that elude an empirically and methodologically limited logic of experience. This reveals a fundamental limit to the significance of natural science—and at the same time the place where philosophical and theological reflection make their legitimate contribution.

Between explanation and meaning: Biology and theological ethics in interdisciplinary dialogue

The following paragraph understands interdisciplinarity as a methodically controlled, step-by-step process. The starting point is the insight that dialogue between theological ethics and the life sciences often fails due to implicit epistemic assumptions, conceptual ambiguities, and asymmetrical claims to validity. Interdisciplinarity is therefore initially defined as a process of translation that requires transparency regarding methodological prerequisites and disciplinary boundaries. Building on this, a processual model of dialogue is developed that leads from the perception of disciplinary foreignness to the clarification of relational responsibilities and ultimately to critical-productive transformations of one's own ways of thinking. The concluding section translates this processual understanding of interdisciplinarity into fundamental dialogical attitudes, which are summarized under the triad “being young – being Catholic – being European.”

Dialogical prerequisites: Emerging interdisciplinarity as translation work

Interdisciplinary collaboration is a demanding form of academic communication, as it mediates between different styles of thought, epistemic interests, and methodological approaches. It primarily requires translation and communication processes in which researchers explain their concepts, assumptions, and areas of interest in order to facilitate mutual understanding.³⁶ Many controversies arise less from substantive disagreements than from failed or missing translation—for example, when gene-centred models are still assumed in the relationship between theological ethics and the life sciences, even though biology has long since developed relational and integrative approaches within the framework of the Ex-

³⁶ Jürgen Habermas' (b. 1929) *concept of communicative rationality* is helpful here, according to which understanding is achieved through language and social cooperation depends on actors making their meanings and claims to validity mutually understandable in a sincere process of communication.

See Römpp, *Habermas*, 154–160.

tended Synthesis. Precisely these approaches call for conceptual and hermeneutical mediation and open up new perspectives for theological-ethical anthropology.

Translation, however, means more than methodological clarity. It requires critical self-reflection and a willingness to re-examine one's own conceptual frameworks considering the other discipline. Following Ian Barbour (1923-2013), dialogical models emerge as spaces of mutual learning in which theological ethics takes empirical insights seriously without relinquishing its normative claims.³⁷ Translation work does not aim at harmonization but at productive difference: scientific explanations and theological interpretations are not merged but related to one another according to their respective logics. Interdisciplinarity thus becomes a long-term process of translation that keeps differences visible, reduces misunderstandings, and opens new spaces of shared understanding—without dissolving the identities of the disciplines involved.

Accordingly, interdisciplinarity is not a one-off encounter but a sustained process of exchange that presupposes trust, a capacity to endure irritation, and openness to correction. At the same time, flawed forms must be avoided, this includes both the merely *additive juxtaposition* of specialized contributions without a shared frame of reference, and an *epistemic imperialism* that instrumentalizes other disciplines.³⁸ Genuine interdisciplinarity is instead marked by a controlled shift in perspective that makes differences visible and fruitful. In this way, the biosciences can empirically sensitize theological ethics, while theological ethics articulates normative and existential dimensions that elude scientific analysis. The goal is not fusion, but mutual enrichment grounded in an awareness of one's own limits and in openness to the productive otherness of the other discipline.

Interdisciplinary dialogue as a process

A serious interdisciplinary dialogue does not take place primarily in singular, isolated encounters, but rather emerge as the cultivated outcome of courageous, intellectually open processes of exchange conducted over extended periods of time. They presuppose not only methodological attentiveness, but also an attitude of mutual trust, epistemic humility, and a willingness to subject one's own conceptual framework to the same critical scrutiny as that of others. In order to make the internal dynamics of such processes more visible, a model framework will be developed below that can serve as a heuristic orientation. Its point of departure lies in a concept originally formulated within religious pedagogy: in the context of developing interreligious competence, Mirjam Schambeck (b. 1966) outlines a "hermeneutics of the stranger,"³⁹ which aims to make the idea of difference

³⁷ Barbour, *Naturwissenschaft trifft Religion*, 14–53.

³⁸ Brandl, *Moral*, 29–31.

³⁹ Schambeck, *Interreligiöse Kompetenz*, 157.

productive without unilaterally resolving the tension between the familiar and the foreign. Building on this, she proposes a three-tiered scheme of competence levels that, for the purposes of the present inquiry, can be productively transferred from an interreligious to an interdisciplinary context and reinterpreted here as distinct *levels of discourse*.

(1) *In the context of perceiving the stranger* (discourse level I), whereby this does not represent a purely cognitive registration, but rather a hermeneutically oriented encounter with otherness. Differences are not perceived as obstacles but become a basic impulse that initiates interdisciplinary learning. This initial mutual immersion in the thought patterns characteristic of the respective disciplines opens up a panorama of new perspectives and, at the same time, reveals the tensions that, in a sense, represent structuring elements for the ongoing exchange.⁴⁰ Two requirements are of central importance here:

- Fundamentally, it is impossible to take the first step without a thorough, mutual clarification of the underlying validity claims and the directly corresponding scientific-theoretical approaches. In generating knowledge, the biosciences consider *a posteriori* approaches based on concrete experience, specific observation, and subsequent analysis.⁴¹ In contrast, theological ethics primarily chooses *a priori* approaches: these are based on insights gained *a priori* (i.e., before experience) and on the interrelationship between revelation and reason.
- Following on directly from an epistemological overview, it is important to prepare an appropriate level of language by sensitizing each other to the specific language of academic discourse. Terms that appear identical at first glance can have very different semantic meanings due to their internal history of meaning. Such shifts can lead to misunderstandings that can strain dialogue or even cause it to fail. Added to this are the linguistic “shadows” cast by philosophical remnants—by which are meant conceptual residues from earlier philosophical traditions, assumptions, or metaphysical frameworks that continue to shape the vocabulary and implicit presuppositions of a discipline even after the original theories have been abandoned or transformed. These remnants persist in key terms, metaphors, and modes of argumentation and therefore often continue to exert an unconscious influence in the background theories of scientific

⁴⁰ Sumser, *Evolution der Ethik*, 536.

⁴¹ A posteriori approaches refer to epistemological modes of inquiry in which scientific knowledge is derived from experience. In the natural sciences, they are based on empirical observation, measurement, and experimentation, followed by analysis and theory formation. Knowledge claims are not regarded as given in advance but as inherently revisable and dependent on methodological control, reproducibility, and intersubjective verification.

discourse, sometimes guiding interpretation and framing debates without being explicitly recognized.⁴² Here, attention must be paid both to one's own terminology and to possible misunderstandings that may arise from the language of the other discipline.

(2) In a second step, the *restructuring of cognitive configurations* (discourse level II) is examined regarding determining relationships: it is no longer sufficient to merely perceive the other; now the relationship between the disciplines must be determined and the implications of the previously articulated differences clarified. This is a demanding process, as it requires both demarcation and recognition. The boundaries of the respective disciplines must be identified, but not in a way that devalues them, rather in the awareness that each discipline produces genuine insights that are unique to its own field.

This allows for a differentiated allocation of *area-specific authority*,⁴³ whereby they are also assigned discourse-promoting functions: theological ethics has normative, evaluative, and prescriptive functions. As a normative discipline, it develops fundamental standards and values derived from Christian revelation and theological tradition. In its evaluative function, it examines and assesses existing moral attitudes, social structures, and concrete actions in relation to these standards. Finally, it has a prescriptive function in that it offers practical guidance and formulates concrete recommendations on how people can shape their lives in responsibility before God and in solidarity with others. Furthermore, in an interdisciplinary context, critical solidarity is a discourse-promoting function peculiar to it. Conversely, the biosciences operate both descriptively and explanatorily. They are descriptive in that they capture the phenomena of living organisms in their observable form, measure them, and translate them into precise descriptions. They become explanatory when they go beyond pure description and reveal the underlying mechanisms, causes, and functional relationships—in other words, the “why” and “how” that make the inner structures of life understandable. In this way, the biosciences open empirical fields of learning that provide theological ethics not only with factual information, but also with a deeper understanding of the biological and anthropological conditions of human existence. They confront

⁴² Körtner, “Schöpfung, Kosmologie und Evolution,” 70.

⁴³ This approach has its origins in Albertus Magnus (1206/7-1280): he emphasizes (especially in his writings on natural research) the importance of clear demarcations of competence. Although he recognizes the existence of authorities, he also questions them. For him, a hierarchy of authorities recedes into the background; instead, he attaches importance to so-called “area authorities.” Nevertheless, he also regarded these as merely relative authorities in their respective fields, subject to correction. In this respect, he did not follow them unconditionally, but rather with a “*plus quam*” approach. However, this criticism was not based on external findings but arose within the respective field through rigorous argumentation.

See Schupp, *Geschichte der Philosophie im Überblick*, 372.

ethics with the material and procedural dimensions of life, with the contingencies of nature and the limits as well as possibilities of physical reality. This gives rise to a space for resonance in which ethical reflection is sharpened by empirical knowledge and at the same time challenged in its normative independence.

This level of discourse requires precise terminological clarification, since each discipline has its own conceptual framework that defines both its legitimate modes of expression and their limits. Bioscientific description and theological interpretation follow different patterns of rationality and claims to validity, giving rise to distinct possibilities of judgment as well as clear epistemic boundaries. Problems arise when terms or methods are extended beyond their proper scope of application, resulting in epistemically unfounded claims—for example, when normative questions are reduced to empirical measurability or theological categories are assigned explanatory functions they cannot fulfil. Reflective use of terminology therefore serves not only mutual understanding but also safeguards professional integrity by preventing categorical confusion and preserving each discipline's distinctive modes of thought. Only when terms are used with awareness of their epistemic scope and limitations can an interdisciplinary dialogue emerge that does not blur methodological differences but instead makes them a productive resource.⁴⁴

(3) The final step addresses *critical-productive transformation* (discourse level III), whereby the “self” repeatedly opens itself up to change and now presents itself as something “dialogically transformed.” In the course of learning mutual understanding, previously fixed ideas and thought structures are broken down and readjusted in direct relation to the other. This takes place on the basis of joint philosophical reflections and leads to an “upward” discourse. What is meant here is a discourse option that detaches itself from the concrete individual questions of research and raises itself to a reflexive level: bioscientists who reflect on their work philosophically and philosophical-theological ethicists engage in an exchange about the premises of their thinking, the scope of their methods, and the limits of their knowledge. In this sense, the discourse is directed “upwards” not towards new empirical results, but towards a deeper understanding of the foundations on which scientific and ethical evaluations are based.⁴⁵ Only then can they contribute to a comprehensive view of humanity. This necessarily includes a significant change in the relationship between theology and philosophy in general: Karl Rahner (1904-1984) points out that their traditional monogamy must come to an end in favour of a contemporary *ménage-à-trois* with other sciences (such

⁴⁴ Knapp, *Soziobiologie und Moralthologie*, 23.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 14.

as biology).⁴⁶ Ultimately, a cooperative effort must be sought that is shaped by both transcendental philosophy and hermeneutics.⁴⁷

Fundamentally, a differentiated anthropology is required that adopts a metadialogical stance toward the findings of the biosciences. This means that it neither negates nor seeks to supersede them, but rather critically reflects upon and situates them within a broader horizon of meaning. Such a stance, however, is only sustainable if it is metaphysically grounded in a philosophy of subjectivity, since only this framework can adequately address the relation between objectifying forms of knowledge and the subject's performative knowledge, which cannot be fully objectified.⁴⁸ However, it is also necessary to conceptualize a gradual anthropology that does justice to the biologically empirical structure of the human being. From the evolutionary perspective, the human being is embedded in the continuity of the living world and shares essential biological characteristics with other species. A contemporary anthropology must not marginalize this kinship but must recognize it as constitutive of human existence. In this way, the human being appears not as a categorical rupture within nature, but as a being that has emerged within natural processes of development. This gradual perspective, however, must not lead to a reduction of the human being to its biological dimension. From the standpoint of the philosophy of subjectivity, the special ontological status of the human being's spiritual nature must instead be emphasized. Following Rahner, this status can be defined by the fact that the human being is a transcending being: an individual capable of surpassing itself and the world, and of projecting itself within the horizon of transcendental freedom. This capacity for self-transcendence grounds a uniqueness of the human being that cannot be explained in empirical-biological terms but instead calls for a metaphysical interpretation.⁴⁹

Furthermore, the program should be a language-sensitive exchange. To ensure mutual understanding, the specific terminology that has developed historically should not be fundamentally changed. However, it is necessary to establish linguistic agreement that allows the dialogue partners to understand the terminology adequately. It is also essential to examine whether the respective specialized languages cast "accompanying shadows" that go beyond the competence of the speakers, such as ideological influences that can occur even when there is a clear separation of areas of competence in the respective academic language.⁵⁰

The central aim of interdisciplinary engagement thus lies in increasing the complexity of thought—not in the sense of complicating matters gratuitously, but in

⁴⁶ Rahner, "Philosophie und Theologie," 12.

⁴⁷ Demmer, *Moraltheologische Methodenlehre*, 194.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴⁹ Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens*, 42–50.

⁵⁰ Knapp, *Soziobiologie und Moraltheologie*, 23–24.

cultivating a heightened sensitivity to difference.⁵¹ The goal is to treat tensions not as obstacles but as productive spaces from which new insights may emerge. Precisely because interdisciplinary discourse tends to expose blind spots and challenge entrenched assumptions, it requires ongoing phases of critical differentiation. Only through such processes can dialogical development proceed, conceptual and theoretical presuppositions be examined, new ideas be generated, and existing frameworks be expanded.⁵² In this sense, interdisciplinarity proves to be a reciprocal and multifunctional project of exchange, whose strength lies precisely in enabling information sharing, positional clarification, mutual critique, and, ultimately, a more comprehensive illumination of reality.⁵³

Being Young, Catholic, and European: Attitudes for interdisciplinary theological ethics

In a concluding step, this chapter explicitly interprets the triad “being young—being Catholic—being European” (which is the subject of the overall project) in the context of interdisciplinarity between theological ethics and the biosciences, which deliberately seeks to refute any suspicion of old-fashionedness or intellectual rigidity. The triad does not function as a mere sociological attribution, but as a heuristic framework for describing the attitudes that are necessary to ensure that the dialogue between theological-ethical reflection and empirical life sciences does not result in parallel monologues, reductionism, or even apologetic defensive reactions. It describes attitudes for positioning theological ethics within a scientifically influenced present without betraying its inherent logic.

A noteworthy impulse in this regard comes from the biosciences themselves. Life does not unfold through the rigid preservation of seemingly immutable structures, but through continuous development that includes the transmission of fundamental information. The underlying evolutionary idea can thus serve as a heuristic perspective for understanding church tradition. In this context, the concept of tradition takes on special significance for Yves Congar (1904-1995): for him, tradition is not merely the rigid transmission of doctrines, but a living process of passing on the faith founded in the Bible within the church. Tradition arises and develops in history under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and is therefore not merely a preservation of traditional forms but rather presents itself decisively as a living fidelity to the Gospel. This perspective makes it clear that fidelity and openness to renewal are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually dependent: tradition remains faithful to its origins precisely by continually confronting new historical and social situations. In this context, Congar distinguishes between *tradition in the singular*, i.e., the fundamental transmission of the biblical message, and *traditions in the plural*, the historically developed ecclesiastical forms and practices that are subject to change. Not only the Magisterium contributes to the living

⁵¹ Körtner, “Schöpfung, Kosmologie und Evolution,” 71.

⁵² Sumser, *Evolution der Ethik*, 536.

⁵³ Zelinka, *Normativität der Natur – Natur der Normativität*, 49.

transmission of the faith, but the whole Church – for example, through the liturgy and the sense of faith of the faithful, as well as through theology.⁵⁴ Against this background, the triad “young – Catholic – European” can also be understood as a hermeneutical key that describes how such a dynamic tradition can take shape in the field of tension between theological reflection and bioscientific knowledge.

(1) In this context, being young refers to an epistemic attitude. It means, in other words, remaining open to change, to the unfinished and provisional nature of one’s own thinking and being willing to critically question familiar patterns of thought. A young theological ethic does not approach the life sciences from a position of supposed normative superiority but recognizes their advances in knowledge as genuine contributions to the understanding of life. It resolutely refuses to rush into “canonizing” moral answers. It is prepared to critically examine its own questions, concepts, and forms of argumentation in the light of biological insights. Being young here means asking questions where disciplinary routines lead to quick conclusions and understanding the productive irritation caused by empirical knowledge not as a threat, but as a motor for ethical development. In this willingness to subject itself to critical self-examination one can recognize an attitude that resonates with Congar’s understanding of tradition: if tradition is indeed living fidelity to the Gospel, then it cannot consist in the mere repetition of past answers but must continually prove itself anew within the circumstances of the present.

This attitude is particularly evident in the dialogue with the biosciences. Instead of merely imposing normative restrictions on scientific findings or apologetically rejecting them, a young theological ethic understands interdisciplinary exchange as a learning process. Dialogue with the life sciences is not perceived as a threat to theological identity, but as an opportunity for intellectual maturation, for clarifying normative concepts, and for further developing ethical judgment. Being young here also means tolerating ambiguities and not prematurely reducing moral complexity. It is precisely in dialogue with the life sciences that theological ethics shows its strength, where it does not conceal differences but makes them transparent. It is precisely where empirical knowledge unsettles familiar certainties that a dynamic can emerge which prevents tradition from becoming rigid.

(2) In this context, being Catholic refers to an attitude of holism and universal relevance. The term “Catholic” (*kat’ hólōn*) refers to the claim to perceive reality in its contexts and to develop ethical judgments not in isolation but relationally. Catholic theological ethics keeps in view the connection between faith, reason, and created reality. It resists both a fideistic retreat into the inner church, and a reduction of theological argumentation to purely functional moral justifications.

⁵⁴ Famerée and Routhier, *Yves Congar: Leben – Denken – Werk*, 139–155.

In a postmodern, pluralistic world, being Catholic therefore does not mean homogeneity or normative isolation, but rather the ability to translate theological ethics is called upon to bring its normative convictions into public discourse in a reasoned manner, without denying its religious origins. It sees itself as a mediating instance between ecclesiastical tradition and contemporary society. Here again Congar's understanding of tradition becomes fruitful. If tradition is living fidelity to the Gospel, it cannot be reduced to the preservation of a closed system of propositions. Rather, it requires a continuous work of translation in which the fundamental message of the Gospel is articulated anew within ever changing historical and cultural contexts. Catholic theological ethics therefore understands itself as part of such a dynamic process of tradition—one that preserves its identity not through isolation but through dialogical openness.

(3) Ultimately, being European refers to an attitude of historical self-positioning and critical loyalty to the complexity of intellectual tradition. Europe is not characterized by a uniform worldview, but by a productive tension between biblical-ecclesial tradition, ancient and medieval thought, Enlightenment criticism of reason, and modern science. These tensions should not be understood as a deficit, but as a source of intellectual dynamism and normative reflection. A European theological ethic is therefore committed to a tradition that understands truth not as possession but as a search. It accepts the plurality of perspectives, cultures, and sciences as a constitutive feature of Europe and seeks "unity" not in uniformity or normative conformity, but in the dialogical and constructive recognition of difference. Within this horizon, Congar's understanding of tradition acquires a specifically European resonance. Living fidelity to the Gospel here means acknowledging the historical polyphony of one's own heritage while maintaining the courage to interpret that heritage anew. European theological ethics therefore seeks unity not in uniformity or normative conformity but in the dialogical and constructive recognition of difference.

A young, Catholic, European theological ethic therefore aims at an orientation toward "unity" that is not directed against diversity but rather thrives on it. It understands itself as a dialogical ethic whose normative strength arises from the conjunction of fidelity to tradition and openness to innovation, and whose future viability depends on its willingness to continually engage with the challenges posed by science, society, and culture. This balancing act can be illustrated particularly clearly by the concrete example of gene editing.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Gene editing refers to a set of biotechnological methods that enable targeted modifications of an organism's DNA. Using tools such as CRISPR-Cas systems, specific genetic sequences can be added, removed, or altered, allowing scientists to modify genes with a level of precision not previously possible.

- In this context, a “young” theology refrains from hastily setting normative boundaries or responding with blanket rejections. Rather, it uses new findings in the life sciences as an opportunity to examine and further develop its own interpretive frameworks. It is precisely here that the tension between tradition and innovation becomes apparent. The biotechnological possibilities arising from this open up new avenues for action, but at the same time raise fundamental questions about the extent of human agency over life, the boundary between therapeutic healing and biotechnological optimization mania, and ultimately the question of responsibility toward individuals, communities, and future generations. Tradition does not appear here as a rigid counter-principle to innovation, but rather as a space of orientation that provides a rich reservoir of central ethical standards—such as respect for the inalienable dignity of the human person or the responsibility for the preservation of creation. It is precisely at this point that the critical and supportive role of theological ethics is needed.
- Furthermore, a “Catholic” theological ethics should address reality within its broader contexts. It must therefore not evaluate such genetic interventions solely on the basis of technical feasibility or individual benefit but must always maintain a clear focus on the relationship between humanity, nature, and social responsibility. From this perspective, a remarkable affinity emerges with contemporary systems-oriented biology, which understands life decisively as a complex network of interdependent relationships: When such interventions in the genome take effect, they also potentially affect broader organic, social, and ecological contexts. A theological ethics that takes this approach seriously will therefore avoid moral simplifications and be prepared to deal with complexity and uncertainty. Only in this way can innovation become a space in which the living dynamics of tradition can continually unfold in the light of new bioscientific insights.
- Finally, considering the challenges posed by gene editing, a “European” theological ethics sees itself as a space for thought that has emerged from the history of Europe itself: from the ongoing dialogue between the biblical-Christian tradition, philosophical reflection, Enlightenment criticism, and modern science. It is precisely this polyphonic origin that shapes its stance toward the new possibilities for intervening in the human genome. The associated questions regarding human dignity, responsibility toward future generations, and the limits of technological shaping of life cannot be decided by a single authority. Rather, European theological ethics is rooted in the conviction that truth is not possession but a quest—an open, critical, and dialogical process. It therefore sees the

recognition of different perspectives not as an obstacle, but as the prerequisite for theology, ethics, and the biosciences to jointly strive for a responsible framework for dealing with gene editing.

Conclusion

This chapter advocates for a contemporary, “young” theological ethics that positions itself confidently, dialogically, and with a willingness to learn in the field of tension between modern life sciences. This constellation does not appear primarily as a threat, but rather as a productive challenge: theological ethics should neither retreat apologetically nor uncritically adapt to scientific interpretive frameworks but rather engage in an independent and constructive dialogue. In view of the apparent dominance of anthropocentric and naturalistically reduced views of humanity, this task takes on particular urgency. This article therefore identifies key obstacles to interdisciplinary exchange and, at the same time, traces the opening up of modern biology toward more relational and systemic explanatory models that open up new possibilities for dialogue in theological ethics.

Against this backdrop, this chapter understands biology as a learning landscape for theological ethics. Although it does not establish normative standards, it does provide important insights into the empirical conditions of human existence. Building on this, the chapter develops three guiding anthropological dimensions: relationality, malleability, and symbolic capacity, which together enable biologically informed but non-reductionist impulses for a theological-ethical anthropology. Furthermore, the article profiles theological ethics as a critical and supportive companion to the life sciences. It reflects on the methodological limits of empirical research, reveals its implicit assumptions, and focuses on questions of meaning, identity, and responsibility that elude scientific measurability. Interdisciplinarity is understood not as a one-off encounter, but as a long-term practice of translation and mutual learning. Following a “hermeneutics of the foreign,” the chapter distinguishes three levels of interdisciplinary discourse: the perception of otherness, the clarification of disciplinary responsibilities, and the critical-productive transformation of one’s own ways of thinking.

The triad “young—Catholic—European” ultimately describes the attitudes of a future-oriented theological ethics: openness and a willingness to learn, a holistic and translatable perspective, and a critical-dialogical understanding of tradition that sees truth as a search. With these attitudes, theological ethics can maintain its independence in dialogue with the biosciences while contributing to ethical orientation in a bioscience-dominated present.

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EUROPE'S BACKYARD: THE TASK OF A THEOLOGY FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN

Jean Claude Attard

Abstract

Etymologically, the Mediterranean means “the middle of the earth” (from *medius*, ‘middle’, and *terra*, ‘earth’). It has long been perceived as such not only geographically—situated between Europe, Africa, and Asia—but also politically, as a site of encounter and conflict between East and West, North and South. Yet modern history increasingly portrays the Mediterranean as Europe’s “backyard,” a frontier where the continent confronts its political, cultural, and religious tensions.

This development unfolds at a time when Catholic theology itself is undergoing a shift from a Euro-centred orientation to a more global one. Pope Francis has called for the decentralisation and regionalisation of theology, encouraging reflection to emerge from diverse regional contexts rather than exclusively from European centres. These regional contexts function as centres in their own right, even if they remain historically connected to Europe and the institutional life of the Church. By revisiting the history of the *locus theologicus* and the ecclesial foundations of contextual theology, this study explores how concrete spaces become places where God reveals himself and calls human beings.

Focusing on the Mediterranean allows this shift to be examined more closely. Although known to ancient and medieval geographers, the Mediterranean became the subject of sustained scholarly reflection only in the 20th century. When understood as both an inhabited space and an experienced place, it can be interpreted not merely as an anthropological category but as a *locus theologicus*, inviting attentive engagement with the lives, histories, and experiences of peoples and communities.

This development is further encouraged by theology’s growing dialogue with other disciplines, as emphasised in *Veritatis Gaudium*. By engaging transdisciplinarily with the human sciences, a theology from the Mediterranean seeks to illuminate its transformative significance for both society and the human person.

Introduction

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), as was rarely the case with earlier councils, dealt explicitly with the social context of its time. Vatican II adopted

the pastoral grammar of *ecclesia ad intra* and *ecclesia ad extra*, proposed by the Belgian Cardinal Leo Joseph Suenens. In December 1962, at the request of Pope John XXIII, he suggested dividing the conciliar reflection on the Church into two parts: one addressing the Church's inner life, leading to the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* (LG), and the other reflecting on its mission in the world, resulting in *Gaudium et Spes* (GS).¹ The Council ultimately went further than this by turning its attention to the Church's role in the world (GS 44).

This has consequently led to a rethinking of revelation in relation to history. Such a reconsideration of receiving the Word of God in history was developed in *Dei Verbum* (DV), but what was at stake here was the understanding of faith as an existential reality. This led to the reception of John XXIII's proposals on the grounds of a Council that was both pastoral and ecumenical in character, and has also brought about a new relationship between thought and practice.

In this regard and in continuity with the spirit of Vatican II, the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* (VG), promulgated by Pope Francis on 8 December 2017 and made public on 29 January 2018, sets in motion "a wise and courageous renewal" for the "missionary transformation proper to an 'outgoing' Church" (VG 3). This renewal requires a process of discernment and reform carried out in dialogue with both history and the present (VG 2). Dialogue with history alone risks producing answers rooted in a traditionalism divorced from reality, while engagement with the present alone would lead to a rootless form of reflection.²

This dialogue aims to foster a new humanism that enables contemporary human beings to recognise themselves in both their human and transcendent vocations, while offering the Church the possibility of engaging the present with relational creativity.³ Pope Francis first emphasises this in the programmatic document of his pontificate, the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG): the Pope called for the "task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization" (EG 33). Theology plays an important role in proposing the Gospel amid the diversity of cultural contexts and recipients.⁴

One such cultural context is the Mediterranean. Once considered the middle of the earth, not only geographically but also politically, the Mediterranean today finds itself at the periphery of events unfolding along its increasingly divisive and disruptive shores. Using Joseph Cardijn's (1882–1967) "see, judge, act" method, as developed by the Institute of Practical Theology at the University of Vienna,⁵

¹ Boeve, "*Gaudium et Spes* and the Crisis of Modernity," 83.

² Di Luccio and Narvaja, "«*Veritatis gaudium*» e rinnovamento degli studi ecclesiastici."

³ Ibid.

⁴ Kruse, "Theologie im Aufbruch: Ein ökumenisch höchst relevanter Text," 127.

⁵ Polak, "Pastoraltheologie: Eine Selbstvergewisserung Der Kirche im Licht der Gegenwart."

this paper examines the development of theology from the Mediterranean after *Veritatis Gaudium*.

The starting point is Orientation, that is, clarifying the context which led to the need for a renewal of Catholic higher studies. Section 1 refers to different Church documents from Vatican II onwards, which paved the way for *Veritatis Gaudium* to become a turning point in theological studies. Section 2 deals with Perception, that is, with the developing understanding of the *locus theologicus* across time. Examining this development more closely enables the interpretation of the multifaceted meanings of the present and allows criteria for assessment to be developed. The next step would be to interpret these assessments in light of the Mediterranean as an anthropological reality. Section 3 therefore deals with interpretation and verdict: how do these assessments fare in a particular context?

The starting point is therefore to identify the conditions that led to the emergence of a theology from the Mediterranean. Only then is it possible to act. The ultimate aim is decision and action: what should be done with what one is and with what one has? Section 4 develops perspectives for action, drawing on the insights gained to formulate arguments and proposals concerning what can and should be done, and by whom. The most pressing question in this context is how to reconcile being young, Catholic, and European with a 21st century theology from the Mediterranean.

Orientation: The Church in the Modern World

The changes brought about by Vatican II are immediately evident in what one reads in the first schema of *Lumen Gentium*, *De Ecclesia*, mentioned in its first chapter, the “Nature of the Church Militant”. This 19th century image of the Church, the Church as *societas perfecta* which confronts the errors of the times, spoke of triumphalism, clericalism and legalism. The Constitution ended up refraining from defining the Church while still making use of biblical images to describe her mystery.⁶ Christ, not the Church, is the “light of the nations” (LG 1); the Church is a sacrament for the salvation of the world: “sign and instrument” (LG 1, 48 and 49). Christ remains the *Locus theologicus fundamentalis*.⁷

The understanding that the Church is founded on and finds her image in the trinitarian unity of God further roots the origins of the Church in this mystery (LG 4): the Church is the people of God (LG 2), the Body of Christ (LG 3) and the Temple of the Holy Spirit (LG 4).⁸ The Church, understood as the people of God, stands in historical continuity with her origins, marked by the believers’ endeavour to translate the challenge of the Christ event into the present so as to preserve

⁶ Stockmeier, “Kirche unter der Herausforderung der Geschichte,” 150.

⁷ Di Pilato, *Discepoli della via*, 189.

⁸ Stockmeier, “Kirche unter der Herausforderung der Geschichte,” 151.

God's saving work through constant appropriation.⁹ This also explains why the Church must avoid any sacralisation of herself and of some aspects of her life.¹⁰ In light of the universal call to holiness, however, the Church, herself holy and yet always in need of being purified (LG 8), must help the world to live and grow in holiness.¹¹ The identity of the Church thus lies in her fidelity to the Gospel, yet this very fidelity calls the Church to live continually in an attitude of exodus: a movement towards the Other marked by boundless trust and open hands.¹²

It was evident to many during Vatican II that what was known as Scheme XIII (the future GS) was progressing with difficulty in its drafting due to the lack of a "Method". What would be the most suitable method for the Council to achieve the main purpose of the Church, namely evangelisation? Some complained that this "secular" approach was contrary to the identity and mission of the Church herself. In light of the new Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, approved in November 1965, the context of the Church's mission appeared importantly wider. This widening depended on recognising the intimate relationship between the inalienable and universal dignity of human beings and their identity as children of God. "In doing so", Cardinal Franz König of Vienna commented, "the Church aspires in a certain way to share the fruits of the Gospel even with those who do not believe".¹³

For the Church is located in the world and not apart from it.¹⁴ The doctrinal reflections in the first part of *Gaudium et Spes* acknowledge the fruits of modernity and critically evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of modern realities (GS 4–10, 41–42), as the Church sought to relate the modern project to the Christian story and to situate it within the context of ultimate meaning. In doing so, this properly understood modern progress also becomes part of the fulfilment of God's plan (GS 23–24, 33–34, 38, 43). The second part addresses important features of the contemporary context and proposes concrete responses to some urgent problems accompanying the realisation of modern projects.¹⁵

According to Hans-Joachim Sander, *Gaudium et Spes* articulates the method of the Council in three steps: "scrutinising (*perscrutandi*) the signs of the times" and "of interpreting (*interpretandi*) them in the light of the Gospel", so that "she can respond (*respondere*) to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other (GS

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Quisinsky, "Synodality and Sacramentality Beyond Sacrality," 36.

¹¹ Ibid., 44.

¹² Di Pilato, *Discepoli della via*, 46.

¹³ Ibid., 155–56.

¹⁴ Sander, "Gaudium et Spes: From the Binary 'Church-World' to the Triad 'Church-World-Pastorality'," 188.

¹⁵ Boeve, "Gaudium et Spes and the Crisis of Modernity," 83–84.

4).¹⁶ From this point onwards it was no longer possible to do theology without taking into account social, political, economic, cultural and/or religious contexts.

For Hans Waldenfels all theology is, therefore, “contextual”.¹⁷ He argues that the theologian may thus be compared to someone who stands on the threshold of a house. Standing on the threshold means being, so to speak, simultaneously inside and outside: one is attentive both to the arguments of those at the door and to those of the inhabitants of the house. What matters most, however, is entry into the house. On the one hand, one appropriates the insights offered by the social sciences concerning how people understand God, Jesus of Nazareth, the Church, themselves, the world, and the society in which they live. On the other hand, one presents oneself with the knowledge that comes from within, as an invitation addressed to all, both inside and outside. The salient point of theology is then to present the door as the door of salvation (in the words of the Gospel according to John [10:7.9], Jesus said: “I am the door”).¹⁸ The context, therefore, is originally a “question” which, in turn, becomes a word in time and space.¹⁹

The mentality of “Church versus world” could no longer be applied, and attentive to these signs, the Church itself was drawn into the world and placed in relation to the times. This marked an important breakthrough in the grammar of the Catholic Church.²⁰ This breakthrough cannot be overestimated. *Gaudium et Spes* was not addressed to the Catholic Church, nor to Christians, but to the whole of humanity. From this point of view, it was pointless to begin with a language that two thirds of the world’s population did not understand. What was needed was a vantage point acceptable to all, Catholics and non-Catholics alike.²¹

The question is not whether modernity weakens faith, but whether theology has adequately understood how authority, mediation, and moral formation have been transformed by modern social structures. What is at stake here is whether theology can remain faithful to the Incarnation while taking modern human experience seriously, rather than retreating into abstraction. Vatican II did not offer theology new answers, but a new way of listening; one that takes lived human reality as a privileged *theological locus*.

Perception: The theological locus in an age of contextual theology

This journey becomes a journey in constant re-understanding of the *locus theologicus*. In the wake of the religious, political, and theological upheavals of the

¹⁶ Sander, “Theologischer Kommentar zur Pastoralkonstitution über die Kirche in der Welt von heute *Gaudium et spes*,” 719.

¹⁷ Waldenfels, *Contextual Fundamental Theology*, 23–24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁹ Di Pilato, *Discepoli della via*, 206.

²⁰ Sander, “*Gaudium et Spes*,” 188.

²¹ Xavier, “Theological Anthropology of ‘*Gaudium et Spes*’ and Fundamental theology,” 128.

16th century, Melchor Cano (c. 1509-1560) worked on a method capable of finding an adequate place for the sources of research and of giving effectiveness to the dialectical comparison on topics of Faith and morality against “adversaries” no longer just of another religion (Jews or Muslims) but baptised in the common belief.²²

Cano posits seven proper theological places of authority from which arguments for the defence of Catholic Faith can be sourced: Scripture, Tradition, the Universal Church, the Councils, the Roman Church, the Holy Fathers and the Scholastic Doctors and Canonists.²³ He further lists three other theological places which are alien to the Church: human reason, philosophy, history.²⁴ Within the proper places, the first two are “constitutive places of theology” since they designate “the legacy of faith”²⁵; on the other hand, other places are complementary. Cano’s intention was very clear: to make available to theologians the tools suitable for doing theology without moving away from the Truth, and to point out “where” to find the sources of theology in an orderly and clear way.²⁶

Vatican II took this discussion further. It helped with the understanding that there are as many new *loci* as there are the innumerable possibilities that God offers to man and woman to lead them to the “full truth” (John 16,13).²⁷ If the big question posed anew by Vatican II was about the Church and the world (Can the Church be modern or up-to-date? Should the Church be modern or up-to-date? Or should it be anti-modern? And what are the criteria for solving this issue?), the answer it came up with, reading the “signs of the times”, is not just one more source for the formation of theologians but becomes the *modus procedendi* of theology, because that is Jesus’ style, his *modus*.²⁸

In this respect, when *Veritatis Gaudium* points to a “bold cultural revolution” that is just beginning, it refers to processes that has a chance of success only if its theological teachings help to develop such a culture of knowledge and evangelising practice.²⁹ The question is whether theology, in organising its studies, is capable of doing so. The approach of *Veritatis Gaudium* aims to enable a language-capable, relevant theology in transformation processes.³⁰ This highlights the need of a more elaborate contextual theology.

²² Di Pilato, *Discepoli della via*, 91.

²³ Contreras-Aguirre, “Speculative and Practical Theology in the Second Scholasticism,” 572–75.

²⁴ Gruber, “Religious Language in “Other” Places: Cano’s *De Locis Theologicis*,” 183.

²⁵ Contreras-Aguirre, “Speculative and Practical Theology in the Second Scholasticism,” 572.

²⁶ Di Pilato, *Discepoli della via*, 100.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 103–4.

²⁸ Faggioli, “Reading the Signs of the Times through a Hermeneutics of Recognition,” 339.

²⁹ Hoff, “Auf dem Weg zu einer »kulturellen Revolution«?,” 90.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

The modern ecclesial foundations for contextual theology were arguably set, however, with *Querida Amazonia* (QA). The document states that “Everything that the Church has to offer must become incarnate in a distinctive way in each part of the world” (QA 6) and that “a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach” (QA 8). The document insists that questions of justice must be integrated in debates on the environment, for the cry of the earth cannot be separated from the cry of the poor. The people’s words, “their hopes and their fears should be the most authoritative voice at any table of dialogue on the Amazon region. And the great question is: ‘What is their idea of ‘good living’ for themselves and for those who will come after them?’” (QA 26).”

Pope Francis claims that “we believers encounter in the Amazon region a theological locus, a space where God himself reveals himself and summons his sons and daughters”. This is significant for a few reasons. When Pope Francis claims that “we believers encounter in the Amazon region a theological locus” (QA 57), he is rooting the concept of a theological place in geography, or at least in the relationship between people and their environment. A space (this openness and this possibility) becomes a place (which it is grounded and experienced) because there, God himself reveals himself and summons his sons and daughters.

For this to work, there must be elements which unite the whole space, or region, and which make it distinctive from others. Can we say so with respect to the Mediterranean?

Interpretation and verdict: The Mediterranean as an anthropological reality

From the voyages of Ulysses and the lands of olives and vines, to the Phoenicians and their maritime trade, from Jerusalem to Athens, from Carthage to Barcelona, from Alexandria to Rome, the ancient Western world was formed on the shores of the Mediterranean, giving rise to cultural phenomena and empires, such as the Macedonian and then Roman ones with their respective Hellenisation and Latinisation. The Mediterranean is also the sea of the one God; the sea was the framework against which the great monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) built their legacies and fought one another.³¹

There exist, however, many Mediterraneans. Above all, many different conceptions of the Mediterranean itself: a plurality of historiographical interpretations, different public representations and various political aspects of theoretical conceptions of the Mediterranean. These cultural imaginations and rhetorics about

³¹ Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean*, 33.

the Mediterranean might generate more confusion than clarity, for such representations are, first and foremost, a matter of perspective: it is important to know who is looking at the Mediterranean and from where.³²

David Abulafia introduces the Mediterranean as a sea with many names. The Romans made the Mediterranean their possession and called it *Mare internum* and *Mare nostrum*, “the Inner Sea” and “Our Sea”.³³ The Roman Empire is the only obvious example of a pan-Mediterranean empire;³⁴ nonetheless, this sea would remain a constellation of peoples, languages, and cultures. After Rome, three civilisations emerged, born either from the division of the Empire or from the arrival of Islam, influencing one another and facing one another in equal measure: the Western, Christian-Latin civilisation; the Eastern, Byzantine-Orthodox civilisation; and the Arab-Turkish, Islamic civilisation.

What happened in the Middle Ages in the recovery of the Greek philosophical tradition is a good example of this difficulty with definitions and delimitations. The Arabs rediscovered Greek philosophy, the Jews translated it from Arabic, and then Greek philosophy returned to Europe and fuelled the great Scholasticism. Religions, in addition, are not monolithic: they present ramifications and derivations, confessions and traditions, often in conflict with each other. Latin Christianity and Byzantine Christianity remain two Mediterranean expressions of Christianity that will never cease to exchange influences. From the Byzantine area come saints such as Saint Nicholas, not coincidentally the patron saint of Bari, and Saint Mark, also protecting a maritime city like Venice.³⁵

For the Turks, the Mediterranean is the “White Sea”; for the Jews, it is the “Great Sea”; for the Germans, it is the “Middle Sea”; for the English, it is the sea “between the lands”.³⁶ These epic clashes of civilisations in the Mediterranean allowed Anna Canfora to define the Mediterranean as “a most unfortunate sea”.³⁷ Modern writers described the Mediterranean as the “Encircled Sea”, but also as the “Faithful Sea” of several religions, the “Bitter Sea” of the Second World War, the “Corrupting Sea” of neighbours and merchants, and the “Liquid Continent” of peoples and cultures.³⁸ The different Mediterraneans are geographical, political, economic, cultural, religious: the plurality of names introduces the plurality of worlds that directly overlook or indirectly refer to this sea, but also to the different ways in which the Mediterranean can be perceived and/or understood.³⁹

³² Ibid., 9–10.

³³ Ibid., 23.

³⁴ Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, 23.

³⁵ Abulafia, *The Great Sea*, 61–62.

³⁶ Ibid., 23.

³⁷ Carfora, *Mediterraneo: Prospettive storiografiche e immaginario culturale*, Sponde, 43.

³⁸ Abulafia, *The Great Sea*, 23.

³⁹ Ibid., 11.

The name *Mediterranean* is derived from the Latin *mediterraneus*, meaning “in the middle of land” (from *medius* [“middle”] and *terra* [“land”]). The etymology partly explains why defining the limits of the Mediterranean is tricky: that is, the middle of *what* land? According to *whom*? The Mediterranean Basin is a biogeographical region that includes not just countries located along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, but also additional countries that share the Mediterranean culture, climate and flora across at least a portion of their land area. Turkish writer Cevat Şakir Kabaağaçlı claimed, for example, that “the Mediterranean coasts are neither Europe, nor Asia, nor Africa, they are the Mediterranean. Africa begins south of the great sandy desert. Greece, France, and Spain are not Europe, they are all Mediterranean”⁴⁰. On the one hand, is not Portugal, a country which does not border the Mediterranean, a characteristically Mediterranean country? On the other hand, is the Black Sea a sea within the Mediterranean, in the same manner that, say, the Adriatic Sea is part of the Mediterranean? The answers to these questions may differ for cultural, historical, and political reasons.

Early 20th century European intellectual debates began re-imagining the Mediterranean, so-called the “Meridian” world, as a moral and cultural space distinct from the increasingly northern and industrialised Europe of the time. The idea of “Meridian thought” (or *pensée méridienne* in French), especially in the interwar period, made possible a reflection on the Mediterranean which transcended the ideology of a Mediterranean with Latin roots and influence, and opened itself to contributions from non-European shores. After World War I, Europe faced a moral crisis and fragmentation. In this context, a number of intellectuals across France, Italy, Spain, and beyond looked southward to the Mediterranean as a symbolic geography of renewal and equilibrium.⁴¹

Writers such as Paul Valéry, in *La Crise de l'esprit* (1919), invoked the “Mediterranean spirit” as a model of cultural balance following the moral crisis and fragmentation in post-World War I Europe. Albert Camus contrasted the “solar” and life-affirming characteristics of the “Meridian thought” with the nihilistic and ideological tendencies of northern Europe. The “Meridian thought” was a kind of ethical geography, a belief that a geographical place embodied a certain moral luminosity. Camus, who returned repeatedly to the Mediterranean theme in his works, proposes an interpretation that affirms a Mediterranean essence:

“From Florence to Barcelona, from Marseille to Algiers, a vibrant and fraternal people is teaching us essential life lessons. At the heart of this mul-

⁴⁰ Eldem, “Turkey and the Mediterranean: A sterile search?,” 69.

In *Abulafia, The Great Sea*, 11.

⁴¹ Abulafia, *The Great Sea*, 38–39.

triple being, a more secret being must sleep, since it unites us. It is this being, nourished by sky and sea, facing the Mediterranean, smoking under the sun, that we want to resurrect.”⁴²

Camus writes in another passage:

“To serve the cause of a Mediterranean regionalism may seem, indeed, to be restoring a futile traditionalism that has no future, or else to be exalting the superiority of one culture over another and, for example, taking up fascism in reverse, to be setting Latin peoples against Nordic peoples. There is a constant misunderstanding here ... The whole mistake comes from people confusing the Mediterranean and Latinity, and placing in Rome what began in Athens. For us the matter is clear: it cannot be a question of a sort of nationalism of the sun. We cannot be a slave to traditions and bind our living future to exploits that are already dead. A tradition is a past that distorts the present. The Mediterranean that surrounds us is, on the contrary, a living region, full of games and smiles.”⁴³

The Mediterranean was not simply a geographical location but an ethical orientation, understood here as independent of structured religion. In works like *Noces* (1938), *L'Été* (1950) and *L'Homme révolté* (1951), Albert Camus developed a philosophy of limits and human measure rooted in his experience of growing up in Africa and influenced by his travels around Europe, inspired by classical texts and concerned by continental philosophy. *La pensée méridienne* stood for clarity against fanaticism and presented him with a model of balance between suffering and joy, rebellion and restraint; it provided Camus with a clear-sighted ethics of measure.⁴⁴

José Ortega y Gasset, Benedetto Croce and Guido Calogero have all interpreted this “glue” in terms of coexistence, particularly from the early 20th century onwards. They either presented the Mediterranean as a middle-ground between different extremities or associated the “Meridian thought” with humanism and moral clarity. While Meridian thinkers often distance themselves from doctrinal religion as an explanatory framework, this discontent does not signal an absence of sacralisation but rather its displacement into secular narratives of exchange, coexistence, and shared Mediterranean space. This was a search for perspective in an age of chaos. More recently, Franco Cassano’s *Il pensiero meridiano* (1996) revived this idea as a critical alternative to modern globalisation. Cassano gave *il pensiero meridiano* a new sociopolitical depth in the 1990s, offering a critique of

⁴² Camus, “La culture indigène: la nouvelle culture méditerranéenne,” 593. [Translation mine]

⁴³ Camus, “Native Culture: The New Mediterranean Culture.” In Neil Foxlee, *Albert Camus’s The New Mediterranean Culture*, 39.

⁴⁴ Carfora, *Mediterraneo*, 40.

the global North's speed, dominance, and abstraction while calling for the rediscovery of the Mediterranean ethos of slowness and coexistence.⁴⁵

Whereas Camus turned *la pensée méridienne* into a philosophy of life and rebellion, Cassano reinterpreted *il pensiero meridiano* as a critique of the frenetic activity of the North; where Camus articulated a moral sensibility, Cassano sought a social and political grammar. This is about the primacy of relationships over the predominance of economics, and the rootedness in natural elements such as the sea over the uprooting of a civilisation enslaved by technology.⁴⁶ Meridian thought thus prepares the ground for interpreting the Mediterranean not merely as a shared memory or ethic of limits, but as a space of encounter in which coexistence is continually negotiated.

The whole notion of the Mediterranean as a single, distinct region, however, has fallen under hostile scrutiny.⁴⁷ Anthropologists such as Michael Herzfeld have argued that far from being a convenient geographical designation, the term *Mediterranean* is a political weapon used to distinguish advanced, northern Europeans from backward, southern Europeans.⁴⁸ Just as there is an *Orientalism* (Edward Said's book [1978] remains the unsurpassed analysis of the Western construction of the Orient, an Orient filtered through the Western gaze that has distorted it) so it is possible to speak of a *Meridionalism* or *Mediterraneanism*;⁴⁹ just as *Orientalism* captures the West's belittlement of the East, so *Mediterraneanism* depicts the North's reductive construction of the South. The most sharply defined boundaries are in every sense political.⁵⁰

The rhetoric about the Mediterranean, that of sun and sea, sounds, scents and flavours, has often been used to capture an immutable Mediterranean essence. Such imagery suggests continuity, a life close to the soil, unchanging or slowly moving, or even an "amazing freedom".⁵¹ This marks a contrast with the industrial break of northern societies, so when travellers from the North visited the South they were not simply travelling across space but also across time: they sought out the topography of the New Testament and the country people they had read about in classical texts.⁵² The impression that at least some Mediterranean societies have been frozen in time and cut off from the wider world have been stressed upon time and time again by some of the classics of the Mediterranean

⁴⁵ Ibid., 40.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁴⁷ See Herzfeld, *Anthropology through the looking-glass*.

⁴⁸ Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, 20.

⁴⁹ Abulafia, *The Great Sea*, 41.

⁵⁰ Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, 22.

⁵¹ Ibid., 38.

⁵² Ibid., 29.

ethnography. Julian A. Pitt-Rivers' *People of the Sierra* (1966), which virtually inaugurated Mediterranean anthropology in English, is a case in point.⁵³

This debate also remains, to a considerable extent, European-centred. Labels such as *Mediterranean* serve the interests of anthropologists conducting fieldwork in Southern Europe, who were themselves predominantly from Northern Europe. They were, in fact, working too close to home for comfort.

The sin of *Mediterraneanism* can be summarised, therefore, in three points. The first point involves *exoticisation*: by emphasising all that is apparently archaic and seemingly uniform in southern Europe, anthropologists looked to defamiliarize their subjects, deny them their Europeaness and present them as “exotic” North Africans or Middle Easterners.⁵⁴ The second point implies *homogenisation*: anthropologists reversed to vaguely and *a priori* defined cultural traits so as to exaggerate the contrast, the uniformity and tradition of southern European with the diversity and modernity of northern European.⁵⁵ The third point is determined by *restricted comparativism*: comparison between Christianity and Islam, key as it is, overshadows other units of research.⁵⁶

The juxtaposition thus reflects more than just a theoretical divide between *Mediterraneanism* and *Anti-Mediterraneanism*, but also a deeper cultural tension within European modernity itself: between the communal warmth of the South and the ascetic rationalism of the North. This is not simply a theoretical dichotomy but also a cultural–geographical one. This tension is succinctly noted by Predrag Metvejević:

“The discourse on the Mediterranean has suffered from its very discursiveness: the sun and the sea; the scents and colors; the winds and the waves; the sandy beaches and the fortunate islands; the precociously matured girls and the widows shrouded in black; the ports, the boats, and the calls of unknown coasts; the voyages, the shipwrecks, and the tales handed down about them all; the orange, the myrtle, and the olive tree; the palms, the pines, and the cypresses; the pomp and the misery; reality and illusion, life and dreams. These motifs have been abused by literary clichés—descriptions and repetitions of all kinds. Mediterranean rhetoric has served democracy and demagoguery, freedom and tyranny.”⁵⁷

⁵³ Ibid., 467.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 486.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 487.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 487.

⁵⁷ Metvejević, *Mediterraneo. Un nuovo breviario*, 24. Translation mine.

Magical aspects of Mediterranean territories coexist with the stigmatisation of the Mediterranean as a “South”, characterized by the paradigm of backwardness.⁵⁸ During the 20th century, ideological readings of the Mediterranean multiplied. During the Italian colonial era and the reinterpretation of the Roman imperial myth, for example, the revived glories of the Empire aimed to transform the Mediterranean back into “the Inner Sea”, interpreted in an anti-European and anti-Arab sense, on the grounds that the Mediterranean predates both the European and the Arab worlds. In this argument, the archaic is treasured and prioritised. This perspective concerns not simply Italy, but also France and Spain in the assertion of dominance over the northern Mediterranean and the Latin origin of North Africa, against which the Arab-Islamic settlement would have constituted a usurpation.⁵⁹

David Abulafia describes the second half of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century as the “Last Mediterranean”, claiming that an increasingly world-wide economy and an ease of contact across the globe suggest that the interpretation of an integrated Mediterranean is more needed locally than globally. This might well be the “Last” Mediterranean; the eras when the Mediterranean was a meeting-place of civilisations and the hub of political, commercial and cultural activity are long gone, as the sea that once united three continents is now a frontier dividing those same continents from one another. A world once revolved around the Mediterranean; now the Mediterranean revolves around different worlds.⁶⁰

This line of thinking has led sociologists and development economists to become increasingly sceptical of the traditional–modern dichotomy, according to which societies are classified as traditional, modern, or ambiguously transitional.⁶¹ Theologically, however, it may be helpful to speak of a “First Mediterranean”—not as a primordial or foundational stage, but as the first sustained attempt to articulate a shared theological space on an explicitly organisational basis, bringing theologians from across the Mediterranean into deliberate collaboration oriented toward peace.

Development of perspectives for action: The development of a theology from the Mediterranean

Though the great kingdoms and empires of the Mediterranean are long gone, the *mare nostrum* remains the region where the sea shapes the vocation of the land.⁶² Consequently, there can be no peace if “one remains deaf to the cry of the land

⁵⁸ Abulafia, *The Great Sea*, 24.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 26–27.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 640.

⁶¹ Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, 470.

⁶² Pope Francis, “Meeting with Priests, Consecrated Persons, Deacons, Catechists, Ecclesial Associations and Movements of Cyprus.”

and the sea”,⁶³ and thus to the concrete forms of life, memory, and relation forged in and through them.

The Manifesto for a theology from the Mediterranean marks a significant point in the development of contextual theology. Presented to Pope Francis in Marseille on 23 September 2023, the document begins with the claim that it “was born from listening”.⁶⁴ It takes seriously Pope Francis’s call to theology to live “on a frontier”, attending both to the highest of highs and to the lowest of lows of the human experience. Doing so entails doing a theology that is not neutral but “that has its bearing structures in the logic of the incarnation and in the mystery of Easter”.⁶⁵

A theology from the Mediterranean, like all theology, is called to live by listening to the Word of God and the lives of human beings.⁶⁶ History is not simply an applied space but rather the place where an authentic understanding of evangelisation can emerge.⁶⁷ In this manner, one may appreciate how the peoples of the Mediterranean preserve, in their ways of life, the interpretation of theology as *affectus fidei*. This “affective” dimension, inseparable from the “intellectual” one, promotes an intrinsic reading, that is, a reading from within what happens in this context. This makes a theology from the Mediterranean an “immersive” theology.⁶⁸ In this sense, the Mediterranean can be understood as a “theological place”, a place that pays attention to the life stories of individuals and communities for a more narrative theology.⁶⁹

The Manifesto claims that such an understanding is possible also because a theology from the Mediterranean is no longer Eurocentric but attentive to recognising the other without the fear of being “contaminated” by the other. This, in turn, gives a voice to the different shores that surround the Mediterranean.⁷⁰ This includes an appreciation of popular religiosity as the lived faith of the people and as their religious experience rooted in a believing tradition. The symbols and rites become hermeneutics of a shared faith, privileged spaces for the hospitality of different cultures and expressions of this “intercession” that are so typical of Mediterranean relationships.⁷¹

⁶³ Rete Theologica Mediterranea, “For a Theology from the Mediterranean: Manifesto,” 13.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 5–6.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁷¹ Ibid., 9.

A theology from the Mediterranean cannot fail to realise that it is a space of the “in-between”.⁷² In her profound identity the Church is always in-between: in-between heaven and earth, in-between the sea and the land, in-between the house and the street, in-between the text and the context, in between the light of the Gospel and history. The Church lives from this “eschatological tension”, between the gift received from God once and for all in Jesus Christ on the one hand, and its acceptance and understanding in collective and individual history on the other;⁷³ between the part and the whole, between the one and the many, between the simple and the complicated.⁷⁴ A theology from the Mediterranean must recognise that theology, much like the Church and the Mediterranean itself, constitutes a space of the in-between.⁷⁵

In this sense, theology from the Mediterranean is understood as a “science of borders” in which the sea becomes a classic metaphor for navigation and bridges, themselves symbols of the encounter between different cultures. A theology from the Mediterranean rejects the construction of ideological “walls”,⁷⁶ and is also committed to the promotion of justice and the overcoming of the inequalities that cause marginality.⁷⁷ The Manifesto also claims that a theology from the Mediterranean cannot ignore the different political and religious tensions, often at the root of conflicts, so as to advocate and work for peace.⁷⁸

The aim is to be the leaven of a Mediterranean narrative. Demilitarizing religions means “demilitarizing the human heart”⁷⁹, which would, in turn, help demilitarise cultures. This has also been echoed time and again by Pope Leo XIV, who even advocated for “peace that is unarmed and disarming”⁸⁰ in his very first words as Pope spoken from the loggia of St Peter’s Basilica on 8 May 2025.

A theology that ignores its geographical and cultural situatedness risks mistaking partial perspectives for universal norms. What is at stake here is whether the Mediterranean is treated as a marginal terrain or reclaimed as an ethical and theological laboratory where global questions become visible with particular intensity.

Pope Francis argues that it is not possible to read the Mediterranean at the beginning of the third millennium except in dialogue and as a bridge (historical, geographical, human) between Europe, Africa and Asia. Pope Francis also quotes

⁷² Ibid., 10.

⁷³ Di Pilato, *Discepoli della via*, 46.

⁷⁴ Eckholt, “Lokale Theologien und interkulturelle Dynamiken,” 59.

⁷⁵ Rete Theologica Mediterranea, “For a Theology From the Mediterranean,” 10.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁸⁰ Pope Leo XIV, “First Blessing ‘Urbi et Orbi’ of the Holy Father Leo XIV.”

Giorgio La Pira, who defined the role of theology within the region as the contribution to “the construction of a ‘large tent of peace’ ... where the different sons of the common father Abraham can live together in mutual respect”.⁸¹ La Pira, the Pozzallo-born Mayor of Florence in the 1950s and 1960s, organised a series of meetings (later known as the “Mediterranean Colloquies”) to seek common cultural roots and peace around the Mediterranean.⁸² The process of decolonization and the political independence of peoples previously subject to European rule could have provided an opportunity for international communism to expand; this possibility, however, was seen by La Pira as something that could be countered by drawing these peoples into the orbit of the Christian civilisation. Such a project required Christian civilisation itself to rethink profoundly its capacity to dialogue with other religions, peoples, and cultures. La Pira’s conferences sought to safeguard unity in diversity, as expressed in the theme of the sixth Conference for Peace and Christian Civilization, scheduled for 1957 but never held.

Over the years, the cultural and political aims of La Pira’s international initiatives extended to sub-Saharan countries, seeking to foster a culture of peace and global coexistence.⁸³ The transcendent dimension of Christian civilisation was essential for freeing the field from the mythology of medieval Christendom and opening the possibility of dialogue with other civilisations. La Pira already recognised that Western Christian civilisation could not simply impose itself as universal. Yet this alone was not sufficient to allow Christian civilisation to enter into dialogue with other civilisations not founded on Christian inspiration or tradition. The issue was (and remains) of such magnitude that it could not be resolved unequivocally, much less definitively, at the Conferences.⁸⁴

To address this challenge, La Pira could rely on several principles that had become fixed points of his thought: the social orientation inscribed in the nature of the human person and the consequent unity of natural human communities (families, peoples, and cities), and the awareness of the theological dimension of history.⁸⁵

These elements would continue to shape later reflections on the Mediterranean as a space where dialogue between peoples and religions becomes a condition for peace. In essence, dialogue with culture remains central. The task, after all, remains to “encourage greater openness to the Gospel on the part of all ... for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of respect and fraternity” (VG 5). Ecclesiastical studies are called to provide inspiration and

⁸¹ Pope Francis, “Meeting on the Theme ‘Theology after *Veritatis Gaudium* in the Context of the Mediterranean’.”

⁸² Mandreoli and Giovannoni, *Spazio europeo e mediterraneo*.

⁸³ Ibid., 35.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 37.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 37–38.

guidance, and to articulate and express in a new, challenging and realistic way their proper task:

“The questions of our people, their suffering, their battles, their dreams, their trials, their worries possess an interpretational value that we cannot ignore if we want to take the principle of the Incarnation seriously. Their wondering helps us to wonder ourselves, their questions question us. All this helps us to delve into the mystery of the Word of God, the Word that requires and asks that we dialogue, that we enter into communion.” (VG 5)

Beyond portraying the Mediterranean as a bridge, Pope Francis defined it as “precisely a sea that is also a crossroads”⁸⁶. To misunderstand that crossroads, he insisted, is to misunderstand the Mediterranean itself—a perspective that reinforces his emphasis on historical and existential concreteness:

“It is a sea geographically closed to the oceans, but culturally always open to encounter, dialogue and mutual inculturation. Nonetheless, there is a need for renewed and shared narratives which—based on listening to the past and to the present—speak to the hearts of people, narratives in which it is possible to see oneself in a constructive, peaceful and hope-generating way.”⁸⁷

The Mediterranean is a geographical and cultural crossroads not only in terms of the East–West divide typical of the bipolar world shaped by the Iron Curtain, but also in terms of the North–South divide generated by the deep inequalities of the global economic system and the consolidation of a powerful North.⁸⁸ The anti-democratic drift in Trump’s USA, Putin’s tsarist neo-imperialism, and Xi Jinping’s economic domination of China further reinforce this picture. The Mediterranean is at the crossroads of this global disorder.

The emphasis on “renewed and shared narratives” rather than mere novelty foregrounds both the importance of memory but also the collective dimension of identity. A theology from the Mediterranean translates into its practice the principle of “dialogue in all fields” (VG 4b). Pope Francis, by emphasising “renewed and shared narratives,”⁸⁹ is helping theology engaging with those who are at the peripheries, even those of thought, while putting the human experience, the joys and the sufferings, back at the heart of the Church’s evangelising mission. When the

⁸⁶ Pope Francis, “Meeting on the Theme ‘Theology after *Veritatis Gaudium* in the Context of the Mediterranean’.”

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Church engages with postmodern critical consciousness, she encounters a challenging dialogue partner, one that offers an opportunity for Christian faith to incarnate itself anew, an incarnation that will remain valid for as long as this critical consciousness itself endures.⁹⁰

The challenges of a theology from the Mediterranean have to do with developing ways of thinking rooted in reality.⁹¹ “Theology,” Pope Francis insists, “cannot be done in a setting of fear... By understanding the Word of God in its original Mediterranean context, it is possible to discern the signs of the times in new contexts”⁹². One must also not allow this place of encounter to become a theatre of conflict; one must not permit this “sea of memories” to be transformed into a “sea of forgetfulness”⁹³.

If we take a closer look at “bold cultural revolution” that Pope Francis calls for in *Veritatis Gaudium*, and at the “renewed and shared narratives” which he proposes as a Mediterranean response to this “bold cultural revolution”, we observe time and time again the need “to overcome this divorce between theology and pastoral care, between Faith and life” (VG 2).

Such a process is not without conflicts. It is the ‘homework’ of the various theological centres, which are embedded in different local churches and cultural contexts, to create the basis for this by promoting a theology that is relevant and scientifically sophisticated at the various levels of Church, society and science;⁹⁴ to help the Church to emerge from herself and to immerse herself into the existential peripheries of our times.⁹⁵

As a matter of fact, in his concluding remarks during the meeting on the theme “Theology after *Veritatis Gaudium* in the context of the Mediterranean” in Naples,⁹⁶ Pope Francis adds *parrhesia* to the evangelical criteria of the Foreword of the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* (*kerygma*, dialogue, discernment, collaboration and network); that is, the ability to press forward to the limits with *hypomoné*, patient endurance. Therefore,

“Theology after *Veritatis Gaudium* is a kerygmatic theology, a theology of discernment, of mercy and of welcoming, in dialogue with society, cultures and religions for the construction of the peaceful coexistence of individuals

⁹⁰ Boeve, “*Gaudium et Spes* and the Crisis of Modernity,” 92.

⁹¹ Pope Francis, “Final Session of the “Rencontres Méditerranéennes.”

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Pope Francis, “Visit to the Refugees at ‘Reception and Identification Centre.’”

⁹⁴ Eckholt, “Lokale Theologien und interkulturelle Dynamiken,” 60.

⁹⁵ Hoff, “Auf dem Weg zu einer »kulturellen Revolution«?,” 77.

⁹⁶ Pope Francis, “Meeting on the Theme ‘Theology after *Veritatis Gaudium* in the Context of the Mediterranean’.”

and peoples. The Mediterranean is a historical, geographical and cultural matrix for kerygmatic welcoming practiced through dialogue and mercy.”⁹⁷

Pope Francis has encouraged the development of a theology from the Mediterranean that is an ethics of encounter, mercy and fraternity. Given the region’s “[d]ense fragmentation”⁹⁸, one may argue that the tension between the distinctiveness of small communities and the connective exchanges that link them encapsulates the Mediterranean’s inherent meanings. Labels risk reproducing the very stereotypes they seek to overturn; identity stereotypes do not necessarily aid in interpreting reality and they rather freeze and rigidify physiognomies and lead to dangerous historical reductionisms.⁹⁹ Ultimately, the Mediterranean resists reduction to a single narrative: Mediterranean identity, if such a thing exists, emerges through exchange rather than essence.

The task of theology after *Veritatis Gaudium* in the context of the Mediterranean is, therefore, to be “in tune with the Spirit of the Risen Jesus, with his freedom to travel the world and reach the peripheries, even those of thought”,¹⁰⁰ as one should treasure the great theological synthesis of the past to look for new paths. Additionally, “it is necessary to *start from the Gospel of mercy*”,¹⁰¹ since theology is born amid specific human situations. “Doing theology”, as a matter of fact, “is also an act of mercy”, for “Theology, by following the path of mercy, prevents the mystery from being domesticated”.¹⁰²

Conclusion

What, then, is the task of a theology from the Mediterranean after *Veritatis Gaudium*, particularly for younger European Catholic theologians formed less by continuity than by inheritance? In relation to Europe, a theology from the Mediterranean recalls that although Europe is one, it is different; that although it is united, it is not uniform. This unity-in-difference should serve as both a warning and an invitation to European Catholic theology, especially for younger generations who encounter the tradition not as a settled centre but as a plurality already marked by internal difference. The task of theology, in this context, is not to become Eurocentric but to remain genuinely inculturated, learning to receive the Christian heritage as a living tradition that must be interpreted anew within the plurality of Mediterranean histories and cultures.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, 25.

⁹⁹ Abulafia, *The Great Sea*, 41.

¹⁰⁰ Pope Francis, “Meeting on the Theme ‘Theology after *Veritatis Gaudium* in the Context of the Mediterranean’.”

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

For young European Catholics in particular, different European theological traditions are not necessarily points of origin but fields of reception, encountered simultaneously and often without a clear hierarchy. Alongside these European traditions stands a Mediterranean theological tradition, shaped by encounters across three continents and by a history that is at once European, African, and Asian. This orientation situates theological reflection beyond strictly continental or national frames, foregrounding regional forms of relation that emerge through shared histories of encounter rather than through state-based boundaries. To recognise this plurality is not to fragment the discipline, but to acknowledge the concrete conditions under which theology is now learned, inhabited, and renewed.

One contemporary initiative acknowledges these Mediterranean conditions particularly well. The *Bel Espoir* project, launched as part of the Mediterranean meetings promoted by Pope Francis, brought together around 200 young people from across the Mediterranean shores over eight months in 2025 to reflect on a series of shared challenges.¹⁰³ Travelling by sea and stopping in different ports, the initiative addressed eight themes ranging from migration and ecological responsibility to interreligious dialogue and the challenges faced by women. What emerges from this experience is a space of listening in which different shores of the same region learn to speak to one another. The eight themes addressed along the *Bel Espoir* route highlight several of the concrete tensions through which a theology from the Mediterranean is currently being articulated.

In conclusion, a theology from the Mediterranean emerges where three continents meet, where cultures, faiths, and histories have long been intertwined, and where unity has never been achieved without negotiation. It invites European Catholic theology, especially in its younger generations, to cultivate a posture of receptive vulnerability: to learn to inhabit plurality without anxiety, to remain open to encounter rather than retreat into inherited conceptual certainties, and to practise epistemic humility in recognising that no single theological language or tradition exhausts the meaning of the Gospel. In this sense, Catholic theology is at its most faithful not when it secures its own centre, but when it learns how to dwell at the margins, listening before it speaks, and receiving before it claims to teach.

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¹⁰³ Mar Yam - MED 25 Bel Espoir, “MED 25 - Bel Espoir: L'école de la paix en Méditerranée.”

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CHALLENGING THE CHALLENGES: BEING YOUNG, CATHOLIC AND EUROPEAN IN A SYNODAL CHURCH – CONCLUSIONS

Michael Quisinsky & Fáinche Ryan

Being young, being Catholic, being European involves being participant in a lively conversation with many voices. Pope Leo XIV, greeting a group of young people aboard the “Med 25 Bel Espoir” while it was docked in the Port of Ostia, praised their efforts to promote dialogue and understanding across cultures, religions, and nationalities, stressed:

“How important it is to learn to talk to one another, to sit down, to learn, to listen, to express your own ideas and your own values, as well as to have respect for one another so that other people will feel that they are truly being listened to. The experience of dialogue which you are promoting across the various countries of the Mediterranean is indeed a sign of hope for the world and also for all of us, and for yourselves, too, as you learn to experience living an important aspect of human life.”¹

The Pope continued to emphasize the necessity of building bridges among people from many different nations, and of learning to become builders of peace. As it happens, “Bel Espoir” was sailing in the Mediterranean while the online discussions, which led to this collection of essays by young Catholic scholars, were taking place. The contributions, published in this book, demonstrate at once the diversity of topics addressed, and the complexity of the questions which arise when doing theology in Europe today. Diverse though the topics are there is unity, the unity of addressing topics from a Christian perspective, specifically from a Catholic one. The topics, addressed by young scholars from throughout Europe, seek to engage with the challenges of the time and culture we live in. There are particular challenges to the Church in Europe at this time. The various essays reveal that there are not only difficulties in being Christian, and specifically Catholic, in this time, but being authentically Catholic in turn brings specific challenges to the society of this time. Hence the paradoxical title of this Conclusion “challenging the challenges”.

This collection of essays, with its variety of contributions, is presented as a participation in this ongoing conversation towards greater and deeper peace. The book highlights four dimensions of this complex and important discussion: 1. A

¹ Pope Leo XIV, “Greetings of His Holiness Leo XIV on the Occasion of his Visit to the ‘Nave-scuola Med 25 Bel Espoir’.”

Europe in search of identity; 2. A secular Europe; 3. The richness of European Theology and 4. The significance of the Synodal Process.

Being young in a Europe in search of identity

The faith of the Church, at all times, challenges people to continually rediscover the newness of the Gospel in following Jesus Christ. This is a “newness” that connects Christians of the present with people of past and future times. At the same time, people in each new era challenge the faith. They ask new questions, questions of their time, and they seek to address these questions as they work toward answers. The challenge is to remain faithful to Tradition, as one moves forward creatively in response to new questions. Christian faith in Jesus Christ seeks to be of service to people. Jesus Christ, the origin and content of this faith, in his historical life served the people he encountered. While in his life on this earth Jesus personally encountered relatively few people, nonetheless what he revealed as Christ applies to all peoples of all times: “For God’s Word, by whom all things are made, was Himself made flesh so that as perfect human He might save all peoples and sum up all things in Himself”. (GS 45)

Jesus Christ lived in the Near East. His worldview was shaped by the history of his context. As news of his resurrection spread rapidly along the shores of the Mediterranean, Christianity became embedded in the languages and ways of thinking of Europe. In this way the history of Europe became interwoven in a particular way with the history of Christianity. And so, while the era of “Christendom” is over, the Christian history of the European continent remains influential, both positively, and in ways that sometimes require critique. It is thereby necessary and important today to consider what we mean by a specifically European Christianity within a global Church, and to do so from within an ever-deepening understanding of Europe’s colonial history. Challenges arise today not only for the identity and shape of Christianity in Europe, but also for the global Church. The global Church today faces specific challenges for faith and life in its specific context, giving careful attention to the questions of how humanity can live together and grow together worldwide.

This issue is never so important as it is today. On every continent, amongst all people, a great sense of uncertainty is palpable. This is particularly exemplified in the confusion regarding identity which pervades many aspects of contemporary life. One response has been an ideological “identitarianism”. A core argument of this collection of essays is that Christian faith possesses tremendous and constructive resources enabling response to these uncertainties.

Referring to the situation in France, Cardinal Jean-Marc Aveline, Archbishop of Marseille and president of the Bishop’s Conference of France, states:

“Perhaps, moreover, it is necessary to discern in current French history the sometimes unexpected resurgences of fractures, disturbances, and seductions that have fuelled identity-based excesses in our country and that, like the plague bacillus at the end of Camus’ novel, lie dormant ‘in the furniture and the linen,’ awaiting ‘the day [...] when, for the misfortune and the instruction of humankind, the plague will awaken its rats and send them to die in a happy city.’ While the desire for identity is perfectly legitimate, identity-based extremism is a dangerous caricature of it. As we experience in our pastoral work, and especially in welcoming catechumens, this desire for identity gnaws at the hearts of many young people, and we must consider it positively, understand it, and nurture it, so that it is not exploited to serve as an alibi for dangerous identity-based tensions. The stakes are high and require us to listen attentively to what is expressed through these aspirations, in order to open these young people to the newness of Christ, to the freedom of the Gospel, and to the catholicity of the Church. To refuse to listen to what the Spirit whispers in our ear through the thirst of these young people would be to distance ourselves from Tradition, for Tradition is alive, but to allow the desire of these young people to unfold on the margins of ecclesial communion would be to jeopardize the growth of their faith, for their faith rests upon apostolic succession.”²

These words of Cardinal Aveline apply not only to France. In many contexts the search for identity can lead to one-sided identitarian extremism. The Christian faith points to ways in which faith can be shared in a complementary manner. It enables difference to be experienced as enrichment and shows how co-existence can be lived within the horizon of God’s love for all people. In the trilogy of the newness of Christ, the freedom of the Gospel, and the catholicity of the Church

² Peut-être faudra-t-il, en outre, déceler dans le présent de notre histoire de France les résurgences parfois inattendues de fractures, de troubles et de séductions qui ont nourri les dérives identitaires dans notre pays et qui, comme le bacille de la peste à la fin du roman de Camus, dorment « dans les meubles et le linge », attendant « le jour [...] où, pour le malheur et l’enseignement des hommes, la peste réveillerait ses rats et les enverrait mourir dans une cité heureuse ». Si le désir d’identité est parfaitement légitime, l’extrémisme identitaire en est une caricature dangereuse. Comme nous en faisons l’expérience dans notre expérience pastorale, et spécialement dans l’accueil des catéchumènes, ce désir d’identité tarade le cœur de nombreux jeunes et nous devons le considérer positivement, le comprendre et le nourrir, afin qu’il ne soit pas récupéré pour servir d’alibi à de dangereuses crispations identitaires. L’enjeu est grand et nous oblige à une écoute attentive de ce qui s’exprime à travers ces aspirations, afin de les ouvrir à la nouveauté du Christ, à la liberté de l’Évangile et à la catholicité de l’Église. Ne pas vouloir écouter ce que l’Esprit souffle à notre oreille à travers la soif de ces jeunes serait nous éloigner nous-mêmes de la Tradition, car celle-ci est vivante, mais laisser le désir de ces jeunes se déployer en marge de la communion ecclésiale serait mettre en péril la croissance de leur foi, car celle-ci repose sur la succession apostolique. (Translation editors)

Aveline, “Discours d’ouverture du cardinal Jean-Marc Aveline.”

as outlined by Cardinal Aveline, Christian faith unfolds as a dynamic that opens up a horizon of fullness for both individual and communal life. In this sense, the contemporary challenge, the search for identity, is itself challenged by Christian faith.

A Secular Europe

Post-colonial Europe lives, by and large, in a secular age. Being young, being Catholic, being theologian, means living and participating in the challenges, the dialogues, and the rich possibilities of journeying through this time. The theological concepts that have emerged from two thousand years of Christianity in Europe are continually called upon to prove their worth in dialogue with the new issues of each time. Every generation brings its own perspectives to bear. The philosopher Jürgen Habermas' magistral "history of philosophy"³ of 2019 dealt with the relationship between faith and reason. Habermas died in March 2026 at the age of 96. His last published text bears witness to this dialogue between generations. It was a birthday greeting for the philosopher of religion Thomas M. Schmidt, who died shortly after his birthday on the last day of 2025 at the age of just 65. In their works Habermas and Schmidt, members of two different generations, tried to understand the interplay of faith and knowledge in a secular and an increasingly post-secular world. They searched for ways for people to live together in harmony and mutual understanding. In his birthday greeting to Schmidt, Habermas reflects on hope in relation to faith. He comments on Schmidt's thesis that hope is possible even without faith, that hope can be based on ecstatic experience said to have a religious character. Habermas writes:

"But to whom could it owe this character, if not to an autobiographical memory of the states of hope associated with a once-vital, but now lost, 'faithful' way of life, which was founded on the constellation of faith, love and hope. However, only those who adhered to this faith and then lost it can remember this. This would restrict the circle of those addressed by the doctrine of a 'new' – in my view paradoxical – practice of hope to the circle of 'last' Christians who suffer from the loss of their faith."⁴

The discussion between Habermas and Schmidt, which was cut short by their deaths, centres on the connection between the possibility of hope, on the one hand, and the memory of a once-viable faith, on the other. Whilst the many individual aspects of this debate cannot be addressed here, the question of precisely this connection does shed light on the background to our volume.

³ Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie. Band 1: Die okzidentale Konstellation von Glauben und Wissen Band 2: Vernünftige Freiheit. Spuren des Diskurses über Glauben und Wissen*.

⁴ Habermas, *Ein Geburtstagsgruß*, 19.

Young Catholic Europeans today will probably find it difficult to relate to the “autobiographical memory” idea. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that young Christians too can take Habermas’s diagnosis as an opportunity to situate their own spiritual biography within the historical context of this faith, which, in its European form, encompasses both its interweaving with and its emergence from European history. What Habermas describes is, in this sense, a fundamental dimension of the Christian faith operating at a deeper level: a supra-individual, community-building connection between people across space and time. Christianity is a specific practice of remembrance and “memory”. But Christianity is at once a foretaste of the future, an awareness that something is lacking in the lives of human beings in this world. Christianity therefore takes both an orientation from its past, and also anticipates that which is yet to come. Christianity is, finally, a community of remembrance of a future that makes constant renewal of the present possible.

The Richness of European Theology

Part of the gift of faith is the *intellectus fidei*, the intelligible understanding of life and of all creation in the light of faith. On the journey towards the fullness of life promised by God, present in seed in both the personal and the communal lives of people of faith, an *intellectus fidei*, a certain intelligence of faith is required, alongside the many other various expressions of faith. These expressions of faith, and this *intellectus fidei*, can only fulfil their potential if they are safeguarded from one-sidedness, and continually placed within an ever-widening horizon. This is where the work of the theologian comes into play. The work of the theologian offers to the ecclesial community an indispensable contribution to its well-being. In and through theology the *intellectus fidei* is rendered into forms that can be communicated and discussed. Such a reflective work on faith is a crucial aid in the continual realignment of the believer with the Gospel. Such theological reflection opens people to new perspectives offered by the Gospel, challenging the lives of individuals and communities. This reflection on faith is a bridge, encompassing both a living connection to the faith of those who have preceded us, and a link to those yet to come, to whom we wish to hand on faith. In this way theology ensures that Christian faith remains ever young, being continually renewed. In *Dei Verbum*, the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, we read: “Sacred theology rests on the written word of God, together with sacred tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation. By scrutinizing in the light of faith all truth stored up in the mystery of Christ, theology is most powerfully strengthened and constantly rejuvenated by that word” (DV 24).

This statement from *Dei Verbum* correlates with the famous words in the Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, the invitation to scrutinize the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel (GS 4). The verb ‘*perscrutari*’ (to scrutinize) expresses

a fundamental Christian attitude: to look closely at the situation seeking to understand. Christian Catholics do not approach questions with ready-made answers. The first task is to gain an understanding of the question, doing so in “in the light of the Gospel”, inspired by an attitude of faith, hope and love (1 Cor 13,13). In doing so, the Christian attitude is to reach a sober realism, acting within the horizon of God’s reality which is love. This is the spiritual core at the heart of theological reflection. On the one hand, faith in the reality of God claims to see “more”, to see more deeply and more profoundly, and thus to take a more authentic view of human reality. On the other hand, the reality of God always remains beyond the grasp of the believer. It is in this tension between discernment in the light of faith on the one hand, and the impossibility of grasping the object of faith on the other, that we speak of the “sober realism” which characterizes Christian life and thought.

It is with this “sober realism” that Christians face the challenges to life and coexistence on the European continent and worldwide. It is not just pragmatism; it is realism enlightened by faith itself. This sober view of the present is nourished by the eschatological dynamism of an orientation towards the faith in Jesus Christ which offers hope to all peoples. The Second Vatican Council described the Church as the “messianic People of God” (LG 9). The Church makes “unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race” the horizon of its actions and thinking. The work of the theologian in Europe today is to contribute to an *intellectus fidei* within these horizons.

It is into this world, of hope and of challenges, of careful sustained attention to faith, of serious theological reflection on reality, that young theologians today are invited to constantly scrutinize the mystery of God, informed by tradition and courageous in creative fidelity.

The Significance of the Synodal Process

The many challenges of the present era are in turn challenged by the Christian faith with its orientation towards a hoped-for fullness, a fullness that opens up the future in God. The Christian faith is not an abstract concept. It is woven into the countless life stories of people in whom the Spirit is present and through whom the Spirit continually whispers in our world. This incarnation of faith takes on various forms, expressing itself in different ways. This is true for socio-cultural contexts throughout history. It also applies to biographies. Irenaeus of Lyon, declared Doctor of the Church and *Doctor unitatis* by Pope Francis, pointed out that, through his Incarnation, Jesus Christ passed through every stage of life and thereby sanctified each stage of life (*Adv haer* II, 22, 4). Athanasius of Alexandria wrote that Christ became human so that humanity might become God, by grace (*De Incarnatione Verbi*, chapter 54) The teaching is clear. Christ sanctifies every stage of life. The *sensus fidei* of all the baptized is to be discerned both individually and communally. This does not mean just simply adding together countless

individual stories and insights. Rather it means that communal expressions of faith are required within which individual experiences and insights of faith have their place. Individual expressions and experiences will be recognizable in their mutual interdependence enriching one another within a dynamic of catholicity.

Such a dialogical understanding of faith leads, almost inevitably, to a synodal practice of the Church as an inspiring enrichment.⁵ Christians who hear the challenges of their time “echoing in their hearts” (GS 1) recognize the Church as a community of those who, in all the diversity of their perspectives and gifts, roles and charisms, are united in Christ. Synodal practice combines “sober realism” and a deep sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Synodality is furthermore already a part of a response to the challenges of the world of our time. Answers to these challenges are sought not authoritatively, but through dialogue. And while the Church is a *communio hierarchica*, synodality can certainly learn something from Europe’s democratic experiences, while conversely the practice of synodality can inspire democratic processes at this time when democracy is being challenged.⁶

Synodality provides opportunity to give concrete form to the newness of Christ and the youthfulness of the Church. The *intellectus fidei* is therefore an activity, a dynamic, a process, and it is only natural that this should be accompanied by a development in the understanding and knowledge of faith. Saint John Henry Newman, recently proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Pope Leo XIV, is a particularly fitting theological model in this context, showing how the connection between personal appropriation and doctrinal development of the faith constitutes the history of faith.⁷

Theology, for its part, must of course be situated within the horizon of the unfolding of faith, a faith which encompasses both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. It is precisely in this connection that faith presents a challenge to the challenges of our time. In doing so, faith is an expression of the “*bel espoir*”, the above mentioned “beautiful hope” expressed by the young people from various countries sailing the Mediterranean as a sign of hope.

As an expression of hope, the project “being Young – being Catholic – being European” echoes what is expressed beautifully by Pope Francis in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit* (2019):

⁵ From the wealth of literature, one volume containing contributions by theologians from the ESCT is worth mentioning: Echkolt (ed.), *Synodality in Europe – Theological Reflections on the Church on Synodal Paths in Europe*.

⁶ See the articles in ET-Studies 16 (2/2025) with the thematic focus “Christianity and Democracy”.

⁷ See also Siebenrock, Wahrheit, *Gewissen und Geschichte*.

“Youth is more than simply a period of time; it is a state of mind. That is why an institution as ancient as the Church can experience renewal and a return to youth at different points in her age-old history. Indeed, at the most dramatic moments of her history, she feels called to return with all her heart to her first love. Recalling this truth, the Second Vatican Council noted that, ‘enriched by a long and living history, and advancing towards human perfection in time and the ultimate destinies of history and of life, the Church is the real youth of the world’. In her, it is always possible to encounter Christ ‘the companion and friend of youth’.” (CV 34)⁸

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⁸ The quotation he cites is from the Final Message of the Council to the Youth (8th December 1965).

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