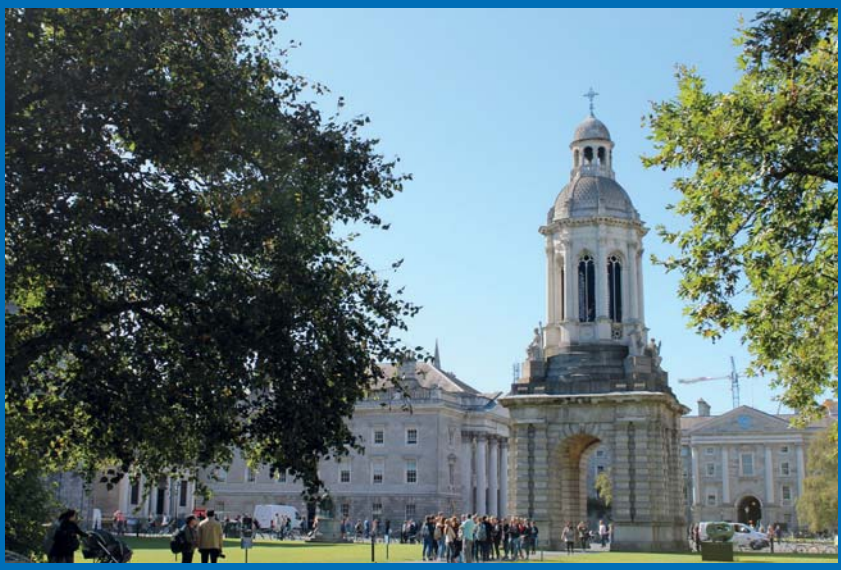
Fáinche Ryan, Emmett O'Regan (eds.)

The Tasks of Theology in Europe Today

Congress Proceedings



LIT

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The Tasks of Theology in Europe Today

Theology East – West

European Perspectives

Theologie Ost – West

Europäische Perspektiven

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Volume 40

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Congress Proceedings

Edited by

Fáinche Ryan and Emmett O'Regan

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PREFACE

"Where are we going? Toward what goal do we wish to orient ourselves?" Pope Leo XIV asked these questions in his first encyclical, *Magnifica humanitas.*[1] He continued "What direction should we choose as a people and as a human community?" These were the very questions the European Society for Catholic Theology (ESCT) addressed when it convened in Trinity College Dublin (August 20–23, 2025) for its fifteenth congress under the title of "*Ad theologiam promovendam*: The Tasks of Theology in Europe Today." These are the perennial questions of theology. More than 300 people gathered to consider, suggest, and argue, how theology might better translate its understanding and its wisdom for more profound participation in contemporary discussion in politics, society, and Church. These Proceedings, which include many of the papers presented, is available both in print and in open access, is a further contribution toward the important task of the theological education of the People of God. The particular focus is the European context.

Theology is our task; theological research, theological education, theological engagement with the world. But what is theology? This is disputed today. The discipline is sometimes stretched too widely in its desire to be relevant. A return to sources, *ressourcement*, is always advisable. Theology, in the Catholic tradition, is *sacra doctrina.* Theology's origin is wisdom received from God: revelation. Within this gift it addresses the questions posed by Pope Leo, and we address them within the contemporary horizon of our world. Theology beckons us to consider God and God's works; to ever more deeply consider the mystery that God is in order that we, the People of God, might seek to ever more truthfully and effectively engage in decision-making and decision-taking in Church and in society. Thus theological study and theological action are tightly aligned. As Christians, we answer the first question, "where are we going?", with our proclamation that because of God's grace we are going toward God. Our destiny is eternal life with God. God is the direction and the goal, the guiding lodestone. So while we study the human, politics, society, culture, Church, and many other matters our lens is always "deiform."

The Congress opened with a keynote address by Prof. Janet Soskice entitled "Have We Forgotten God the Creator?" These Proceedings begin with this paper. In similar style Cardinal Jean-Marc Aveline presented a *Petite théologie de la mission.* He invited the Church to once again deepen its understanding of the

[1] Leo XIV, *Magnifica humanitas*, Encyclical Letter on Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2026), no. 6, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/encyclicals/documents/20260515-magnifica-humanitas.html.

mission God willed to entrust to us, in this complex world. The need for solid theological reflection was emphasised, for, as he noted: experience has taught "*le déficit de théologie se paye souvent en excès d'idéologie*!" (a deficit of theology is often paid for by an excess of ideology!).[2]

Analysis of this complex world was further contemplated in the keynote addresses by Prof. Tomáš Halík and Prof. Antonina Wozna Urbanczak, while Prof. Sigrid Müller together with Prof. Paulo Rodrigues addressed the concrete questions faced by society when it comes to decision-taking at the beginning and the end of life.

The European focus of the Congress, and the desire to remember, to learn from, and to rekindle Europe's theological richness, was reinforced with Prof. Franziska Schnoor's address on early medieval Irish theology on the continent.

Some of the serious challenges *ad intra*, within the ecclesial body were addressed in papers by Dr. Barbara Haslbeck (Spiritual Abuse) and Prof. Eugene Duffy (the perennial need for reform). The new challenges that accompany the opportunities of AI were presented by Bishop Paul Tighe,[3] while Prof. Mark Chapman's paper on *Theology, Europe and the Persistence of War* brought the congress to a sobering close.

An important success of the Congress was the rich presence of "young" theologians, some young in age, all "young" in theology. Many presented their research in the parallel paper sessions. In reading the Proceedings it is important to bear in mind that while some papers are by experienced theologians, many contributions come from these doctoral candidates at the very beginning of their studies, or in their early years of teaching. Their presence added much to the conversations and make an important contribution to these Proceedings.

The diversity and richness of the more than 100 parallel papers presented over the three days of the Congress is represented by the publication of many in these Proceedings. The breadth of scope is a reminder of the challenge of keeping God central to our theological work, and at once of continuously interrogating our own understanding of the mystery that God is as we engage intelligently with "the world." The risk of slipping into ideology must be constantly kept in check.

As you read these Proceedings we invite you to remember that while all the papers have something to offer us for reflection, and indeed for provocation, the papers come from theologians at all stages of the theological journey.

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[2] A shortened version of Cardinal Aveline's address was published in English at the Tablet in September 2025. See Cardinal Jean-Marc Aveline, "In the Service of the World—Dialogue, Promise and Catholicity," *The Tablet* (Sept 3, 2025), https://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/in-the-service-of-the-world/. This address was based on Cardinal Aveline's book, *Dieu a tant aimé le monde: Petite théologie de la mission* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2023).

[3] While Bishop Tighe's paper is not included in this Proceedings, we recommend *Magnifica humanitas* for insight in regard to the Church's current teaching in regard to AI and the human person.

To assist the reader in navigating amongst the forty-five papers, the papers are presented under the following broad headings: *Theology in Europe Today: Identity, Mission, Method, and Memory*; *Church Reform, Synodality, Ministry, and Ecclesial Authority*; *Formation, Pastoral Practice, and Lived Faith*; *Theology, Society, Ethics, and the Public Square*; *Scripture, Doctrine, Hermeneutics, and Theological Language*; and *War, Peace, Ecology, and Global Crisis.*

A notable aspect of our Society for Catholic Theology and of our Congresses is the underpinning vision that theology is a communal exercise of the People of God; there is no distinction between "lay" theologians and "ordained" theologians. That this should be the case in theological education is a matter much debated today. If Church is to be Church, if Church desires to be synodal, that this question is being debated seems dated.

Let us do theology together.

Prof. Fáinche Ryan
President of the European Society for Catholic Theology

HAVE WE FORGOTTEN GOD THE CREATOR?

Prof. Janet Martin Soskice
Professor Emeritus of Philosophical Theology
University of Cambridge
William K. Warren Distinguished Professor of Catholic Theology
Emeritus, Duke University Divinity School

Abstract

This chapter notes how inattention to the doctrine of creation damages the understanding of the doctrine of God. It is common to think of the doctrine of creation as a statement of what God did in the past, "at the beginning." However, the true intent of the creedal statement, "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth" is to assert the belief that God freely creates and freely holds in being "all that is." It is a teaching about grace and gift, the goodness and freedom of God and the dependence of "all that is" on God. *Creatio ex nihilo* is not just a teaching about the created order. It is a teaching about God. It underpins a theology of providence, divine action, the efficacy of intercessory prayer and belief in the resurrection of the dead. This doctrine is not drawn from Greek metaphysics. Neither Aristotle nor Plato had a Creator God in this full sense. This teaching, with roots in Jewish understanding including the Psalms, undergirds the whole of patristic and medieval theology and mystical writings. The medieval Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides thought that *Creatio ex nihilo* was the only teaching that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam held in common. God did not just create matter and material things but "all things visible and invisible." *Creatio ex nihilo* defeats the common Western heresy of thinking of creation in binary terms of material and immaterial. It embeds us human beings with all other creatures, keeping us from distorted anthropocentrism. We are one with all other creatures, held in love by our creator. A proper recovery of the doctrine of creation would allow a contemporary eco-theology to find its profound links with Christology and allow western theology to rejoin Eastern theology in seeing the narrative of Fall and Redemption as belonging to the wider narrative of Creation and New Creation.

Keywords: Creation, *Creatio ex nihilo*, grace, doctrine of God, redemption, eco-theology.

"Have we forgotten God the Creator?" This seems a ridiculous question. Surely one thing everyone knows is that Christians believe in a Creator God? There is this, sitting as the first article of the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.

What could be more obvious? Even those with little or no knowledge of Christianity understand that Christians believe in a creator God.

And yet I entirely agree with Benedict XVI's observation that: "In recent decades the doctrine of creation had almost disappeared from theology … We are now aware of the damage this has caused."[1] It is no coincidence that Rowan Williams, then Anglican Bishop of Monmouth and later Archbishop of Canterbury, writing in 2000, said "Christian reflection on creation has been a bit of a Cinderella in twentieth-century theology—at least until the last few years, when a variety of pressures have brought it very much to the fore."[2]

Apparently neither Rowan Williams nor Pope Benedict had to the fore of their minds the question that so absorbs us today, that of the destruction of what *Laudato si'* calls our common home, although Rowan Williams does list as amongst the pressures on the doctrine of creation "the daily increasing gravity of our environmental crisis." I will not rehearse these: microplastics, rising temperatures, failing crops, forced migrations, polluted seas. All of these are too vivid and present. Pope Benedict and Archbishop Williams were, rather, thinking of the damage that inattention to the doctrine of creation does to our doctrine of God.

Over 50 years ago, the influential article by the historian Lynn White entitled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" (1967) put the blame for environmental degradation and cultural imperialism squarely at the door of Christianity.[3] You will be familiar with this line of thought which, at least in the Anglophone world, has almost gone into the bloodstream. In this telling, the Genesis account grants man dominion over the earth, establishing Christianity as an anthropocentric religion in which every other thing in the world is there solely for the benefit of human beings, to be used at their disposal. Christianity, so this argument goes, teaches the cure of souls, not the tending of the earth. There followed a cascade of criticism of the Christian doctrine of creation—that it justifies extractionism and colonialism, that it embedded the hierarchal thinking that oppressed women and subjugated peoples.

These criticisms were almost entirely based on a certain reading of the first chapters of Genesis. The energetic and effective work of the now not-so-new

[1] Benedict XVI, "Meeting of the Holy Father Benedict XVI with the Clergy of the Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone" (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008), https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/august/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080806_clero-bressanone.html.

[2] Rowan Williams, "On Being Creatures," in *On Christian Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 63.

[3] Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–7, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203.

"New Atheists" (Richard Dawkins, et al.) sealed it into the public imagination that the classical Christian doctrine of creation *just is* a literalistic reading of the first chapters of Genesis.

When I am asked, even by Catholics, what theologians are saying today about the doctrine of creation they invariably mean: "Do theologians still say the world was made in six days?" Most Catholics, of course, do not take this literally. Most readily understand the opening chapters of Genesis as a *myth of cosmic origins*, of which there are many in world religions. But they increasingly fear that our Christian myth is disastrously anthropocentric, an intellectual embarrassment or, amongst Christianity's critics, positively destructive to our common home and to human dignity. And they certainly don't see what this myth has to do with Christ.

A theologian friend told me he found himself sitting on a flight next to a student astrophysicist who told him that he used to believe in God but now he knows the world is too complicated for a God to have invented it.

We must ask, what kind of God did he believe in?

Following the release of the film, *Conclave*, the British actor Ralph Fiennes (now the world's most famous cardinal) was interviewed in *The Guardian* newspaper. Fiennes was asked, amongst other things, about his own beliefs.

> I don't think of myself as a practicing anything, but I've never stopped having a curiosity about what it is to have faith. I'm also very moved by what we can encounter with the art the church has produced. Not just the Catholic church. I was in Thessaloniki recently and went to a museum of icons there, which was profoundly moving. What is it that makes us want to build these churches and shrines? Faith is a huge, potent thing that mankind seems to want to have, even if the forces of logic and science and reason go against it. I'm curious about that energy.[4]

No more condensed summary of modern agnosticism could be found. And as some of you may know, Ralph Fiennes went to Christian schools throughout and is the nephew of a distinguished Catholic theologian, Nicholas Lash, a member of this association who is sadly no longer with us.

I am not going to exonerate Christianity from all the accusations of anthropocentrism, nor deny the disastrous damage human beings have done to our common home. If the churches were not particularly alive to this 20 years ago, they certainly are now. I do want to suggest, however, that something is deeply wrong

[4] Catherine Shoard, "'We Create Gods Because the World Is Chaos': Ralph Fiennes, John Lithgow and Stanley Tucci on Celebrity, Sin and Papal Thriller *Conclave*," *The Guardian*, November 22, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2024/nov/22/stanley-tucci-ralph-fiennes-john-lithgow-conclave-cardinals.

with the way the doctrine of Creation has been received by wider society and even by Christians themselves. This has damaged not just creaturely life, but Christian apologetics. There is an urgent and opportune need to correct this now—a task for theology today.

Early in 2024 I received an invitation, impressively headed with the logos of the WCC, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Anglican Communion, the Vatican, the World Methodist Council and the Lutheran World Association, to speak at a Vatican sponsored seminar in Assisi—in March of that year.

The topic of the colloquium was: "Do We Need a Feast of Creation?" The focus of the gathering was that 2025 would be the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. Various Christian environmental groups had noticed this, and that within the celebrations of the Christian year **(**Nativity, Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Pentecost) most of the articles of the Creed are brought to mind. There remained an outlier, however, for no specific day in the common liturgical calendar celebrated the Nicene Creed's opening article:

> We believe in one God,
> the Father almighty,
> maker of heaven and earth

The Eastern Churches, the organisers pointed out, already had a rich history of celebrating a Feast of Creation, on September 1.

It was an astonishingly successful invitation: the various denominations have since thrown themselves into action, not least the Catholic church, and while the Feast Day remains an aspiration we have already seen, in June 2025, the Decree of Pope Leo and the Dicastery for Divine Worship of a Mass for the Care of Creation (June 8, 2025).[5]

Yet timely attention to the Care of Creation does not, of itself, mean a recovery of the creedal teaching on God, the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and earth.

At the Assisi colloquium, I learned of a useful distinction the Italian language provides between *il Creato* (what is created) and *la Creazione* (God's act of creation). In English, our use of the term "creation" for both blurs this distinction and, while there has been welcome and urgent renewed interest in *il Creato* (creatures and the created order), *la Creazione* remains neglected. In this chapter I will speak of *creatio ex nihilo* as the Christian teaching that unfolds the creedal confession of *la Creazione*—the belief in "the Father almighty, maker of heaven

[5] Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Decree on the Formulary and Biblical Readings for the Mass for the Care of Creation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2025), https://www.vatican.va/content/romancuria/en/dicasteri/dicastero-culto-divino-e-disciplina-sacramenti/documenti/20250608-decreto-missa-custodiacreationis.html.

and earth, of all things visible and invisible." While it may seem dusty and remote, on this teaching stands the rest of the Creed with its unfolding of the divine economy. Yet many in our churches do not understand what it is to confess belief in God the Creator of all that is (*creatio ex nihilo*), or see what this has to do with Christ.

Creatio ex nihilo affirms that God, from no compulsion or necessity, created out of nothing—really nothing, no pre-existent matter, space, or time. God freely creates "all that is" and holds it in being at every moment (*creatio continua*). Creation is not something that happened in the past, not an "event" in this sense, but the continuous gift of the reality of the created world (*il Creato*). This central teaching is nonetheless still widely misrepresented and misunderstood. Heated disputes over "creationism" have led the wider, English-speaking public to suppose, as I have already mentioned, that the central Christian doctrine of creation simply is that the world was made in seven days. Should you mention *creatio ex nihilo*, most churchgoers and most academic philosophers or scientists, if they have any view at all, will assume that *creatio ex nihilo* means the big bang theory; that is, they will understand it to be a theory about cosmic origins at the beginning of time. But *creatio ex nihilo* is not just a cosmogonic theory happily coincident with the big bang theory. To put it bluntly, *creatio ex nihilo* is not just a teaching about the created order but about God.[6]

Central to the teaching is the power, goodness, and freedom of God, and the dependence of "all that is" (for convenience's sake I will say "the world") on God or, more precisely, on God's free choice to create and to sustain (*creatio continua*), which comes to the same thing. It is thus, profoundly, a teaching about grace and gift, though it has other positive ramifications. The Christian teaching is that, were God to cease holding the world in being for a moment, it would not be.[7]

This teaching undergirds the whole of patristic and medieval theology and mystical writings. Paul and Barnabas in Lystra spread the "good news" of "the living God, who made heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them" (Acts 14:15). The martyrs died confessing their God as the God who made heaven and earth. *Creatio ex nihilo* is the only teaching that the great medieval Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides thought that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam held in common.

This teaching undergirds providence, divine action and prayer and was not contested at the Reformation. Yet, since the late Middle Ages, Western churches have

[6] In this chapter I'm drawing extensively on my own recently published book, *Naming God: Addressing the Divine in Philosophy, Theology and Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[7] This teaching is fully compatible with there being an "everlasting" universe. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, thought that God could have created, *ex nihilo*, an everlasting world—that is, a world without beginning or end—although Aquinas believed, on the basis of scripture, that the world in fact had a punctual beginning. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 46, a. 2, co.

put theological emphasis on redemption rather than creation—more prominently in the Protestant denominations but in the Catholic Church as well. The doctrine of Creation (*creatio ex nihilo/ la Creazione*) has not been discarded but neglected and, as Pope Benedict XVI suggests, with damaging effect.

Like the doctrine of the Trinity, *creatio ex nihilo* can be said to be an emergent doctrine, not stated in Scripture but a confession of what must be the case given the scriptures. It is not drawn from Greek metaphysics, as some modern theologians have suggested. Neither Aristotle nor Plato had a Creator God in this full sense. Aristotle believed in an everlasting universe in which God was a source of movement but not of matter. Plato saw his demiurge moulding a pre-existing matter. The consensus of philosophical antiquity was that "from nothing, nothing comes" (*ex nihilo nihil fit*) and that, if there ever was truly nothing, there would be nothing now. This was not acceptable to Jews and later Christians for a number of reasons. Guided by the book of Genesis, they believed that God created matter, too, and that matter was good. This was a decisive conviction in defeating ancient dualisms like Manichaeism, in which the spirit was good and of God but matter not. For Christians, the doctrine of the Incarnation would be threatened if matter were not, itself, good, as they read in the Genesis creation narratives.

Very early on it was understood that space and time were creatures as well, functions of matter, and that a God who creates space and time is not absent from space and time but present at every space and in every time, holding "all that is" in being—an understanding that suffuses Augustine's *Confessions* and his belief that God was nearer to him than his own hands and feet.

The Old Testament's theology of creation is not restricted to the Book of Genesis. Creation is a substantial theme in the theology of the Psalms: "the sea is his, for he made it and the dry land, which his hands have formed" (Ps. 95:5). Importantly, the Psalms and the Book of Isaiah both regularly link God's power as creator with God's faithfulness and power to save. Thus, in Psalm 121:1–2 we read:

> I will lift up my eyes to the mountains:
> From where shall come my help?
> My help shall come from the Lord
> Who made heaven and earth.

In Isaiah 45 an extended address from the LORD (YHWH) works the same theme of creation and salvation:

> Shower, O heavens, from above,
> and let the skies rain down righteousness;
> let the earth open that salvation may spring up,
> and let righteousness to sprout up also;
> I the LORD (YHWH) have created it. (Isa. 45:8)

And in the midst of a stirring address on the need to turn to God and be saved:

> For thus says the LORD (YHWH),
> who created the heavens
> (he is God),
> who formed the earth and made it
> (he established it;
> he did not create it a chaos,
> he formed it to be inhabited!):
> I am the LORD, and there is no other. (Isa. 45:18)[8]

The earliest theology of creation seems to be, like the language of the Psalms, confessional and doxological, underscoring the freedom, power and goodness of YHWH (God) to create and to save, and this remains the tone of the New Testament and of the first Christian theologians.

But perhaps the greatest single textual omission for modern Christians when reflecting on the doctrine of creation is Exodus 3, a text classically central to Jews and Christians when thinking of God, the Creator—Moses's encounter with God at the burning bush. Famously, Moses asks for a name and is given a sequence of names that expand upon the similarity of YHWH, the Holy Name of God, to the Hebrew verb "to be"—"I Am Who I Am," "I Am," "YHWH," "the God of your fathers."

Already Philo, a Jew of the first century, marks a connection between "I Am" or "The One Who Is" and the creation narratives of Genesis. This linking of Exodus 3 with the doctrine of creation was embraced by the early Christian theologians. The "I Am" is understood as the One who confers being on all creation and is the very ground of existence. Nor is this just a Christian imposition on the Exodus narrative. The Palestinian Targums, Jewish texts in Aramaic, provide us with the following glosses on the "*ehyeh asher ehyeh*" (I Am Who I Am) of Exodus 3:15:

> He who spoke and the world came into being, spoke and everything came into being. (Pseudo-Jonathan 14a)

> He who said to the world, "Be," and it came into being, and who will again say to it: "BE," and it will be. (Fragmentary Targum 14aV)[9]

[8] This passage of Isaiah is echoed in Paul's "Christ hymn" of Philippians 2.

[9] For these citations see Graham Davies, "The Exegesis of the Divine Name in Exodus," in *The God of Israel: Studies of an Inimitable Deity*, ed. R. P. Gordon, University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 64 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Creatio ex nihilo, far from being lazy acquiescence with Greek philosophy, amounts to *a revolution in Western metaphysics*. Ancient Greek philosophy never questioned that a divine creator would work with pre-existing materials. In creating matter itself the Christian and Jewish God creates time itself and thus transformed predicates which *were* used by the philosophers to describe the deity, but with different senses. Aristotle's god is eternal, but "eternal" means in Aristotle's scheme, without beginning or end—that is, everlasting. The Christian God (add Jewish and Muslim if you wish) is "eternal" in being the Creator of time, and thus wholly present to our temporal reality but at the same time not as creatures are.

The same is true with words like "cause" and "event." We cannot say that God "caused the world to come into being" in just the same way I might "cause" a cake to be made. That is not a minor qualification. All causation we know is within the created space/time continuum. We should equally be cautious when speaking of creation as an "event" lest we relegate it to one event amongst many creaturely events. Better to speak of it as "the foundation of all God's saving plan."

The doctrine of Creation (*la Creazione*) is what grounds our rejoicing in creatures (*il Creato*). They are gift, our very being is continuous gift. The doctrine of creation embeds us human beings with all other creatures. It keeps us from distorted anthropocentrism or from thinking that we are somehow not creatures, not indeed creatures who are animals—a salient reminder. It keeps us from the hierarchical thinking, found in some Neoplatonic philosophy, where a chain of being means the lower creatures are "farther away" from the Good than the superior ones. All creatures are held in being by the Creator and this continued dependency is no less so for a pope or an angel, than for a sparrow.

We forget about the angels. The early Church did not. *Creatio ex nihilo* defeats the most common heresy of Western modernity which thinks of creation in terms of a binary of material and immaterial. Thus come puzzles as to how immaterial God could act in our material natural order, say in performing miracles (it is the same with time as it is with matter). But God did not just create matter and material things but "all things visible and invisible." The contrast, if one is to be drawn, is not between spirit and matter but between God and creatures (*il Creato*). This contrast is not a binary. Creation is not "over and against" God, nor somehow constrained by an all-powerful overlord, but held in being by God at every moment. God's action in the world, for instance in revelation or miracles, is not a "violation of the laws of nature" but one with God's creative action, which theologians like Thomas Aquinas knew so well.

Above all *La Creazione* (*creatio ex nihilo*) is doxological and the ground of our praise. For all things are held in being by love. One fine expression is found in Julian of Norwich (1343–1416), who sees the world as a tiny thing, about the size of a hazelnut in the palm of her own hand:

> I looked at it thoughtfully and wondered, "What is this?" And the answer came, "It is all that is made." I marvelled that it continued to exist and did not suddenly disintegrate; it was so small. And again my mind supplied the answer, "It exists, both now and forever, because God loves it."[10]

In short, each and every particular thing owes its existence at every moment to the love of God. Nothing could be more secure. That we are, that anything at all "is," constitutes the foundational blessing and the primordial ground for praise.

Creation, then, is not something God "did in the past" but *is doing now.*

Famously, much contemporary eco-theology is weak on Christology (and indeed I have been asked, by green Christians, how the doctrine of Creation relates to Jesus). Yet there are many places where the New Testament speaks of Christ as the one through whom and for whom all things were created (Col. 1:16). The Prologue to John's Gospel, with its strong echoes of the creation narratives of Genesis, identifies the Word Incarnate with the Word through whom all things came into being, an identification which seems to be made by the Johannine Jesus in the "I AM" sayings. "Before Abraham was, I AM," (John 8:58). On the lips of the Johannine Jesus the "I Am" sayings take us back to Exodus 3, but also to the "I AM" sayings of Deutero-Isaiah where, in a sequence of divine self-designations, YHWH declares that he alone is God and creator.

> For thus says YHWH,
> who created the heavens
> (he is God!),
> who formed the earth and made it
> (he established it;
> he did not create a chaos,
> he formed it to be inhabited!):
> "I AM YHWH, and there is no other." (Isa. 45:18).

In developed Jewish and Christian monotheism, the creator is the redeemer. God alone creates and God alone redeems—the two belong together.[11] The Pauline literature frequently alludes to Christ's role in creation, identifying him with Word or Wisdom. This is famously so in 1 Corinthians:

> …for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:6).

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[10] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Elizabeth Spearing (London: Penguin Classics, 1998), chap. 5.

[11] See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008).

And in Colossians:

> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him (Col. 1:15).

Outside of the Pauline writings, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews begins by saying:

> …in these last days he (God) has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. (Heb. 1:1–3).

Similar associations suffuse the Book of Revelation, the most Old Testament of all New Testament books. The book opens with a theophany:

> "I AM the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God,
> who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.
> (Rev. 1:8)

In the verses that follow both God and Christ are called "Alpha and Omega" and "First and the Last," names which are themselves glosses of YHWH, whose only full interpretation in the Old Testament is in Exodus 3 where, as we have seen, a sequence of wordplay expands on the Tetragrammaton and its similarity to the Hebrew verb "to be."

The distinctive name, "First and Last," is not of New Testament coinage but appears as a divine self-designation a number of times in Deutero-Isaiah, underscoring that there is only one God and that this God is the Creator and Redeemer:

> Thus says the LORD (YHWH), the King of Israel,
> and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:
> "I am the first, and I am the last;
> besides me there is no god." (Isa. 44:6, see also 41:4)

It also occurs in Isaiah 48:12 where this name (and the Name) are associated with creation:

> I am He; I am the first, and I am the last.
> My hand laid the foundation of the earth,
> and my right hand spread out the heavens.

The creating and redeeming God is "the One Who Is" (Exodus 3). The Eastern churches preserve this in those icons of Christ where, inside Christ's halo, we find the Greek letters O Ω N—ὁ ὢν—"*ho ōn*," "He Who Is."[12] The One who always was and always will be—Creator and Redeemer.

Conclusion

If we forget God the Creator, it becomes difficult to give a coherent defence of miracles, the efficacy of intercessory prayer, the resurrection of the dead. We fail to see that we are one with all other creatures, held in love by our Creator at every moment (answer to neo-paganism). We lose the very real sense that God is nearer to us than our own hands and feet. We need this teaching to know, not just in our minds but in our hearts, as did Julian of Norwich that God's ultimacy and God's intimacy are one.

In short, if we forget God the Creator much of the Christian message becomes implausible, not because it is scientifically outdated but because our doctrine of God is too small.

A more trenchant criticism to the Western Church comes from the Eastern Church. A number of Orthodox theologians have suggested that we think of two arches in the Divine Economy—the inner arch is the story of Fall and Redemption, but the wider arch is that story of Creation and new Creation. They argue that the Western Church, since the later Middle Ages, has focused too exclusively on what they call the inner arch of divine economy, that between the Fall and Redemption, and have neglected the Greater Arch, between Creation and the final drawing of all into Christ … the Arch between protology and eschatology.

This is being addressed now by increased interest in the West in "deification." In an impressive article on "Deification and Ecology," the Orthodox theologian Elizabeth Theokritoff writes that Redemption is "the rectification of sin" … whereas "deification is the fulfilment of creation," destined from before the world began to Christ.[13] So deification is not "one way of characterising what it means for humans to be 'saved.' It is a way of speaking about the purpose of creation, the intended trajectory derailed by the Fall and restored and fulfilled in Christ."[14] For Theokritoff, and others, this perspective sweeps away at a stroke the anguished discussions that seem to trouble eco-theologians who are troubled by whether the God of our redemption is the God of our creation. The assumption

[12] The icon of Palm Sunday shown in Dr. Louk Andrianos's presentation is a wonderful example of this.

[13] Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Deification and Ecology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Deification*, ed. Paul L. Gavrilyuk, Andrew Hofer, OP, and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), online ed., 252, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198865179.013.40.

[14] Theokritoff, "Deification and Ecology," 252.

that seems to lie behind this puzzlement, particularly for those in the Reformed tradition, seems to be that:

> …creation is a matter of cosmology, whereas salvation, and even the incarnation, relate specifically to mankind and indeed human sin. By contrast, the span of the divine economy from creation to deification through the Incarnation delineates a world view—one centered on God entering his creation, as man, in order to unite with himself. The saving work of Christ is not a *supplement* to Christian cosmology: it defines it.[15]

This is not to discard the drama of Fall and Redemption, which of course are absolutely central, but to see it within the wider setting of God's creating, abiding and ultimately triumphant love. And this wider arc must include the profound goodness of the entire created order. It is not just human beings who are God's creatures, nor yet human beings and angels.

We must develop a theology—a Christology—that understands that Christ is the beginning and the end of all creatures. To this end I am absolutely delighted to see that amongst the Gospel readings for the new Mass for the Care of Creation is my own favourite, the stilling of the storm (Matt. 8:23–27).

> And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, "Save, Lord; we are perishing." And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?" Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm. And the men marveled, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?"
> (See also Psalm 65)

We focus on the doubts of the disciples. We should give more heed to who obeys Jesus. Who indeed is this that "even winds and sea obey him"? It is their Lord and ours, the Maker of heaven and earth.

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[15] Theokritoff, "Deification and Ecology," 252.

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PART I. THEOLOGY IN EUROPE TODAY: IDENTITY, MISSION, METHOD, AND MEMORY

EARLY MEDIEVAL IRISH THEOLOGY ON THE CONTINENT: COLUMBANUS, GALLUS AND THE IRISH MANUSCRIPTS AT THE ABBEY LIBRARY OF ST GALL

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on the Irish abbot Columbanus (c.550–615), his pupil Gallus (c.550–c.640), and the early medieval Irish manuscripts in the Abbey Library of St Gall (Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen). The 6th and 7th centuries lie far removed in a distant past, and early medieval Irish monasticism may seem an unlikely topic for a conference about the tasks of theology in Europe today, yet it strikes me as important, in the face of current challenges, to continue to look to the past. Knowledge of the past can help in finding answers to the pressing questions of today. Columbanus and Gallus are examples of pan-European mobility and the close ties between Ireland and the European continent—in particular, Switzerland—during the early Middle Ages. They serve as a reminder that the idea of a unified European cultural realm is much older than is commonly assumed, dating back to the "dark" 6th century, and at once they highlight the importance of cross-border exchange.

Keywords: Columbanus; Gallus; Irish monasticism; *peregrinatio*; Abbey of St Gall; Irish manuscripts.

Columbanus

One of the most significant figures to bring Irish theology to the continent was Columbanus (c.550–615). To distinguish him from the earlier Saint Columba, the founder of the monastery of Iona, he is sometimes referred to as Columbanus the Younger. He is also known as Columbanus of Luxeuil or Columbanus of Bobbio, named after two of the monasteries he founded during his lifetime.

Access to his life is largely through the writings of Jonas of Bobbio (c.600—after 659).[1] Jonas entered the monastery of Bobbio soon after Columbanus's

[1] Critical edition of the Latin text: Jonas of Bobbio, *Ionae Vitae sanctorum Columbani, Vedastis, Iohannis*, ed. Bruno Krusch (Hannover: Hahn, 1905). English translation: Jonas

death, probably in 616. Thus, he did not know Columbanus personally, and so he based his *Vita Columbani* largely on eyewitness accounts.[2] The earliest surviving manuscript of Jonas's *Vita Columbani* is Cod. Sang. 553 in the Abbey Library of St Gall. This manuscript was produced in the first half of the 9th century at the monastery of St Gall and contains several saints' lives.[3]

Jonas begins his *Vita* with a poem praising Ireland and then depicts a miracle that occurred before Columbanus's birth. During her pregnancy, his mother had a vision in which the sun shone from her womb. Her neighbours, wise and pious people, explained to her that the vision heralded a gifted son who would contribute to both his own salvation and that of others (Jonas, *Vita Columbani,* book 1, ch. 2). This vision is the reason why Columbanus is usually depicted with the sun on his chest.

Columbanus was born in the Kingdom of Leinster around 550.[4] As he entered boyhood, he began to study the liberal arts, particularly grammar, rhetoric and geometry, as well as the Holy Scriptures. He continued these studies until he reached manhood. As his growing affection for women threatened to interfere with his religious studies, he eventually left Leinster and joined Abbot Sinilis[5] to continue his education (Jonas, *Vita Columbani* 1.3). While still in his youth, Columbanus wrote a commentary on the Psalms, which is now lost,[6] but is listed in the oldest library catalogue of St Gall (St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 728;[7] St Gall, c.860/865) as *Expositio sancti Columbani super omnes psalmos volumine I* ("Commentary on all the Psalms by St. Columbanus, in one volume"; Cod. Sang. 728, p. 12).[8] After studying for some time under Sinilis, Columbanus entered the Abbey of Bangor and became a monk under Abbot Comgall. He spent several years in Bangor but eventually began to long once more for *peregrinatio*.

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of Bobbio, *Life of Columbanus, Life of John of Réomé, and Life of Vedast*, trans. Alexander O'Hara and Ian N. Wood (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018).

[2] O'Hara and Wood, trans., Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, 33–35.

[3] Apart from the *Vita Columbani*, it contains other monks' lives composed by Jonas of Bobbio (*Vita Athale, Vita Bertulfi* and *De monachis ebobiensibus*), a genealogy of the saints Patrick, Brigida, and Gallus, and the only surviving copy of Wetti's *Vita sancti Galli*. Description: Beat Matthias von Scarpatetti, *Die Handschriften der Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen*, vol. 1, *Abt. IV: Codices 547–669. Hagiographica, Historica, Geographica 8.–18. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003), 22–25.

[4] O'Hara and Wood, trans., Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, 17. For more detail on Columbanus's date of birth, see Donald Bullough, "The Career of Columbanus," in *Columbanus: Studies on the Latin Writings*, ed. Michael Lapidge (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1997), 1–3.

[5] The name of Sinilis may refer to the abbot of Cleenish in County Fermanagh or to the abbot of Bangor. O'Hara and Wood, trans., Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, 101.

[6] O'Hara and Wood, trans., Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, 102.

[7] Manuscripts from the Abbey Library of St Gall will henceforth be referred to only by their shelf mark ("Cod. Sang.").

[8] Digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/0728.

Peregrinatio, which can be translated into English as "pilgrimage" and also as "ascetic exile," is a central concept in early medieval Irish monasticism. A distinction is sometimes made between *peregrinatio* (leaving one's home region) and *potior peregrinatio*, the "greater ascetic exile" (leaving the country).[9] Columbanus undertook both stages: first, when he left Leinster, and then when he left Ireland entirely and travelled to the continent. In 590 or 591,[10] Columbanus and twelve companions[11] embarked from Ireland for the coast of Brittany (Jonas, *Vita Columbani* 1.4).

By leaving the country, Columbanus, according to Irish law, rose in rank to the level of a regional king or bishop. Foreign rulers were bound to receive him hospitably and to support him.[12] According to Jonas, Columbanus's fame reached the king, and the Irish monks were received at his court. It is not entirely clear which king got in touch with Columbanus first. Although most manuscripts give the name of Sigibert, this cannot be true, since Sigibert was murdered in 576. The name mentioned in the second oldest manuscript, Childebert, is improbable likewise, as Childebert did not take possession of the region where Columbanus settled until 593, two or three years after the arrival of the Irish monks. It is possible that Jonas mixed up the names and Columbanus was received by Guntram, king of Burgundy at the time of Columbanus's arrival, in whose territory Columbanus's first monastic foundations were situated.[13]

Columbanus founded his first monastery in Annegray, a ruined fortress in the Vosges. Jonas notes that the monks settled there "despite the vastness of the harsh solitude and the rocky nature of the terrain."[14] Their life is characterised by "punishment of the flesh, fasting, and mortification of the body" and "unyielding harshness": at one stage they lived on tree-bark and herbs for nine days (Jonas, *Vita Columbani* 1.6–7). This is probably a reflection both of Columbanus's strict ascetic principles and of the difficulties they had to face.

Despite the initial difficulties, Annegray soon grew and became too small for all the new monks, so Columbanus looked for a better site nearby. He found it not more than eight miles from Annegray, in a former fortified settlement called *Luxovium* (Luxeuil) (Jonas, *Vita Columbani* 1.10). When Jonas claims that "[o]nly a multitude of wild animals and beasts, bears, buffaloes, and wolves haunted that place,"[15] he is exaggerating on purpose to present Columbanus as an ascetic hero. Archaeological evidence shows that Luxeuil was inhabited at the

[9] O'Hara and Wood, trans., Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, 16–17, 67.
[10] O'Hara and Wood, trans., Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, 19; Bullough, "Career," 10.
[11] The number clearly references the twelve disciples.
[12] O'Hara and Wood, trans., Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, 19.
[13] O'Hara and Wood, trans., Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, 20.
[14] Quotations from O'Hara and Wood, trans., Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, 109–10.
[15] O'Hara and Wood, trans., Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, 115.

time of Columbanus's arrival and that there had been Christians in Luxeuil since the 5th century.[16]

Soon even Luxeuil became too small, and the Irish monks built another monastery nearby, Fontaine. This monastery was governed by priors appointed by Columbanus, who himself became abbot of both Luxeuil and Fontaine and spent time in both monasteries in turn. To ensure that monastic life ran smoothly during his absence, a written rule was necessary (Jonas, *Vita Columbani* 1.10). Columbanus wrote two rules for his monasteries.

Columbanus and his monks lived peacefully in Luxeuil and Fontaine for many years. Then, in 610, a conflict arose with Theuderic, king of Burgundy, whom Columbanus had criticised for having concubines instead of taking a lawful wife as a queen. The conflict involved Theuderic's grandmother, the dowager queen Brunhild, who feared she would lose influence if her grandson were to marry (Jonas, *Vita Columbani* 1.18). When Columbanus refused to bless the sons whom Theuderic had fathered with his concubines, the conflict escalated. It was no longer merely a matter of Theuderic's illegitimate sons. Theuderic accused Columbanus of refusing to grant every Christian access to the inner sanctum of the monastery, and the Gallic bishops questioned the validity of Columbanus's rules. Columbanus, on the other hand, believed that his monasteries should not be subject to the authority of the local bishops, and accused some bishops of simony and adultery (Jonas, *Vita Columbani* 1.19). The chapters dealing with the conflict show that Columbanus was not afraid to voice his criticism of the powerful rulers openly, even when courtiers and bishops were incited against him.

Eventually, Columbanus was forced to return to Ireland (Jonas, *Vita Columbani* 1.20), together with his countrymen and those "who had come to him from the region of the Britons."[17] However, according to Jonas, a miracle prevented the ship from taking them back from Nantes to Ireland. The ship was driven back by the waves and ran aground on the shore. As soon as the monks and their abbot had left the ship, the ship was driven out to the sea (Jonas, *Vita Columbani* 1.23). One might think that Columbanus and his monks would return to Luxeuil after their rescue from exile; instead, however, Columbanus decided to continue his *peregrinatio.* After a long journey, together with his monks he finally arrived in Bregenz on the eastern shore of Lake Constance, where they received support from the Austrasian king Theudebert II, the brother of the aforementioned Theuderic (Jonas, *Vita Columbani* 1.24–27). Although Columbanus did not particularly care for Bregenz, he promised to "stay there for a short while to spread

[16] O'Hara and Wood, trans., Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, 115–16; Sébastien Bully, Aurélia Bully and Morana Čaušević-Bully, "Die Anfänge des Klosters Luxeuil im Licht der jüngsten archäologischen Untersuchungen (6–9. Jahrhundert)," with Laurent Fiocchi, trans. Guido Faccani, in *Gallus und seine Zeit: Leben, Wirken, Nachleben*, ed. Schnoor, Schmuki, Tremp, Erhart and Kuratli Hüeblin (St. Gallen: Verlag am Klosterhof, 2015), 134–38 and 144–46.

[17] O'Hara and Wood, trans., Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, 142.

the faith among the local peoples"[18] before continuing his journey to Italy. Once again, politics interfered with the peaceful monastic life. The war between the brothers Theudebert and Theuderic escalated. Theudebert was taken prisoner and killed a few days later. Having lost his royal patron Theudebert, Columbanus left Bregenz with his monks and travelled to Italy, where they were received with honour by Agilulf, king of the Lombards (Jonas, *Vita Columbani* 1.28–30). He eventually settled in Bobbio, a "bountiful fertile place, with refreshing waters, and an abundance of fish."[19] This was the last monastery he founded. He died just one year later, on 23 November 615, in Bobbio.[20]

Columbanus's Legacy

After Columbanus's death, both Luxeuil and Bobbio remained important monasteries. Inspired by Columbanus's example, more than a hundred monasteries were founded, mainly in the north and east of the Frankish Empire.[21] This is an essential part of Columbanus's legacy. The second, equally important part consists of his writings.

Columbanus wrote two rules for his monasteries, a *Regula monachorum* ("Monks' Rule") and a *Regula Coenobialis* ("Communal Rule").[22] They can be found in several manuscripts, the oldest of which date back to the 9th century.[23] In St Gall, they are part of the monastery's oldest *Liber capituli* ("Chapter Book") (Cod. Sang. 915), a manuscript containing several monks' rules, a martyrology,

[18] O'Hara and Wood, trans., Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, 159.
[19] O'Hara and Wood, trans., Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, 167.
[20] O'Hara and Wood, trans., Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, 16; Bullough, "Career," 27.
[21] O'Hara and Wood, trans., Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, 27–28; Friedrich Prinz, "Columbanus, the Frankish Nobility and the Territories East of the Rhine," in *Columbanus and Merovingian Monasticism*, ed. H. B. Clarke and Mary Brennan (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 1981), 74, 76–78, 80. The extent of Columbanus's influence is viewed more sceptically by Ian Wood, "Columbanian Monasticism: A Contested Concept," in *The Irish in Early Medieval Europe: Identity, Culture and Religion*, ed. Roy Flechner and Sven Meeder (London: Palgrave, 2016), 86–100, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-43061-8_6.
[22] Critical edition and English translation: Columbanus, *Sancti Columbani Opera*, ed. G. S. M. Walker (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1957), 122–69. The rules are discussed by Jane Barbara Stevenson, "The Monastic Rules of Columbanus," in *Columbanus: Studies on the Latin Writings*, ed. Michael Lapidge (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1997), 203–16, and Albrecht Diem, "Columbanian Monastic Rules: Dissent and Experiment," in *The Irish in Early Medieval Europe: Identity, Culture and Religion*, ed. Roy Flechner and Sven Meeder (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 68–85, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-43061-8_5.
[23] Walker, ed., Columbanus, *Opera*, xliv–xlix.

and a necrology, from which passages were read after prime. In this manuscript, Columbanus's rules appear alongside other monks' rules.[24]

The "Monks' Rule" deals with general principles of monasticism: obedience, silence, fasting, humility, chastity, discretion, mortification.[25] The most important command is obedience. Several chapters in Jonas's *Vita Columbani* exemplify the importance of obedience, none more so than chapter 12. Almost all monks in Luxeuil are ill and unable to work, yet Columbanus orders them to get up and thresh out the harvest. The obedient ones fully recover, whereas the disobedient monks stay sick for more than a year and almost die. The terms *oboedientia/oboedientes* ("obedience"/"those who obey") and *inoboedientia/inoboedientes* ("disobedience"/"those who disobey") appear six times in the rather short chapter. Jonas thus makes it very clear that the illness is a test of the monks' obedience.

Likewise, many passages in the *Vita* refer to fasting. It is not uncommon for Columbanus and his monks to go without food for several days or to eat only the bark of a tree and herbs. However, a prolonged period of fasting often leads to miraculous donations of food. Jonas describes several times how persons nearby are suddenly seized by an impulse to bring food to the monastery. Once even birds appear out of nowhere to save the monks from starvation.[26]

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[24] Cod. Sang. 915, 154–67 (*Regula monachorum*) and 170–84 (*Regula coenobialis*); digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/0915.

[25] The chapter about the Divine Office appears only in some of the manuscripts (Walker, ed., Columbanus, *Opera*, xliv–xlvii). It is not part of the version of the Rule found in the Chapter Book from St Gall. It is possible the instructions about the Divine Office were less important in monasteries that already followed the Rule of St Benedict in this respect.

[26] Passages in the *Life of Columbanus* referring to fasting: Jonas, *Vita Columbani* I, 4: "There [in Bangor] Columbanus began to dedicate himself completely to prayer and fasting […]." I, 6: "He was content with little food, mindful of the proverb that man does not live on bread alone […]." I, 7: "Although there were no reserves of food except for what might be supplied from tree-bark and herbs, he nevertheless began to inspire the souls of all to give themselves over to fasting and prayer for the sake of the sick man. After three days of fasting […], suddenly they see a man standing before the gates with horses laden down with supplies of bread and vegetables." I, 7: "Nine days had already passed in which the man of God and his companions had taken no food other than tree-bark and forest herbs." I, 9: "He had so little to eat that you would think him scarcely alive. His only source of nourishment was a small amount of wild herbs and the tiny fruits which grow in this wilderness and which people call blueberries." I, 11: "[…] they came to their destination in the wilderness with only one loaf of bread for their food. When twelve days had passed […]." I, 27: "While Columbanus and his companions were staying in the city of Bregenz there was a period of harsh famine there. […] After their bodies had been exhausted by three days of starvation, as great a number of birds appeared as the quails that covered the camp of the Israelites, so that the birds covered the whole countryside there." O'Hara and Wood, trans., Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, 102, 109, 110, 114, 118, 160–61.

Columbanus's *Regula coenobialis* ("Communal Rule") is a somewhat puzzling text. Judging by the title, one would expect it to deal with all the practical aspects of life in a monastery—how to become a monk, what duties monks have, who can become abbot, how to elect an abbot, and so on. Instead, it focuses almost completely on breaches of monastic discipline and the penalties incurred. The monks were expected to confess daily to even the tiniest transgressions. The punishment usually entailed beatings, fasting or singing psalms. A monk who talks in a loud voice, forgets to bless the lamp or calls anything his own, is beaten six times (*Regula coenobialis* 1–2). If he accidentally cuts the table with a knife, he is beaten ten times (*Regula coenobialis* 2). If he dares to argue back, he receives fifty blows (*Regula coenobialis* 5). Anything that might disturb the order in the monastery, even coughing while chanting psalms (*Regula coenobialis* 4), is severely punished.

It was undoubtedly the penalties prescribed in the *Regula coenobialis* that earned Columbanus and the Irish monks a reputation for being excessively strict.[27] However, the Rule involves more than its apparent focus on excessive flogging. It is important because the custom of confessing one's sins regularly, as the Rule required the monks to do daily, spread, among others, through Columbanus and the monasteries he founded. Until the 6th century, penance could only be performed once in a lifetime and was therefore usually postponed until the end of one's life. The so-called "tariffed penance" made penance repeatable, which over time developed into the modern sacrament of Penance.[28] Columbanus wrote a penitential, drawing heavily on an older Irish penitential, the *Poenitentiale Vinniani*.[29] Finnian's identity is disputed by scholars, but it is certain that he wrote

[27] There is, however, one chapter in the *Vita Columbani* that paints a surprisingly mild picture of the Irish saint. It deals with Columbanus's relationship to animals. Jonas describes "how he would frequently summon wild animals, beasts, and birds which would come immediately at his command, and he would pet them gently. The savage animals and birds, rejoicing and playing with great delight, would then jump about, just as puppies fawn upon their masters. He even frequently called down a squirrel from the tops of high trees, took it in his hand and put it on his neck where he let it crawl in and out of his habit" (Jonas, *Vita Columbani* 1.15; translation: O'Hara and Wood, trans., Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, 127).

[28] O'Hara and Wood, trans., Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, 28. For a more critical assessment of the Irish contribution to the development of private penance, see Rob Meens, "The Irish Contribution to the Penitential Tradition," in *The Irish in Early Medieval Europe: Identity, Culture and Religion*, ed. Roy Flechner and Sven Meeder (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 131–45, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-43061-8_9. Meens reckons that, although Irish texts partly contributed to the process of developing a practice of private penance, confession and penance did not become a regular part of Christian life until the Carolingian time.

[29] On Columbanus's penitential and its sources, see Elaine Pereira Farrell, "The Penitential of Columbanus: Reception and the Shaping of Christian Identity," in *Columbanus and Identity in Early Medieval Europe: Formation and Transmission*, ed. Conor Newman, Mark Stansbury and Emmet Marron (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2022),

his penitential in the 6th century. No Irish manuscripts of this text survive, but the Abbey Library possesses a copy made in the monastery of St Gall.[30] The penitential of Finnian deals with offences such as adultery, sorcery, theft, perjury, bodily harm and murder. He distinguishes between penances for clergy and for laity. Those for clergy are far harsher, since the clergy were supposed to behave in a morally superior fashion. For instance, a layman who contemplates murder need only fast for seven days, but for a priest the period is a year and a half (*Poenitentiale Vinniani* 6–7).[31]

Apart from his rules and the penitential, Columbanus wrote letters, of which six have survived to this day.[32] Three letters are addressed to popes—the first to Pope Gregory the Great, the third to an unnamed pope, and the fifth to Pope Boniface IV. The remaining letters are addressed to Frankish bishops and priests, the participants of the Synod of Chalon in 603 (Letter 2), the monks at Luxeuil (Letter 4), and a young pupil of Columbanus. It is noteworthy that Columbanus was not only in contact with all the Merovingian rulers but also did not hesitate to write to popes to discuss with them important theological issues of his time, such as the calculation of Easter or the Three Chapters Controversy. The dating of Easter, in particular, was the subject of debate between Irish and continental theologians; the Irish monks used a different method to calculate the date of Easter. This became a serious problem when they moved to the continent and celebrated Easter on a different day from the Frankish Christians in their neighbourhood.[33]

Apart from the sixth letter, which is preserved in two 9th-century manuscripts,[34] none of Columbanus's letters have survived in medieval manuscripts. Jodocus Metzler, librarian at the Abbey of St Gall, produced a copy of a codex containing all six letters, probably during a visit to Bobbio in 1611 (Cod. Sang. 1346).[35] As the Bobbio codex has been lost, Metzler's copy is now the oldest surviving manuscript.[36]

49–62. Critical edition and English translation of Columbanus's penitential: Walker, ed., Columbanus, *Opera*, 168–81. Critical edition and English translation of the *Poenitentiale Vinniani*: *The Irish Penitentials*, ed. Ludwig Bieler (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1963), 74–95.

[30] Cod. Sang. 150, pp. 365–77; digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/0150.

[31] Franziska Schnoor, "The Penitential of Finnian," in *The Cradle of European Culture: Early Medieval Book Art. Summer Exhibition 13 March until 4 November 2018*, ed. Cornel Dora and Franziska Schnoor, trans. Katherine Vanovitch (St. Gallen: Verlag am Klosterhof, 2018), 46–47.

[32] Critical edition: Walker, ed., Columbanus, *Opera*, 2–59. The style of Columbanus's letters is analysed in detail by Neil Wright, "Columbanus's *Epistulae*," in *Columbanus: Studies on the Latin Writings*, ed. Michael Lapidge (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1997), 29–92.

[33] On the Easter controversy, see Caitlin Corning, "Columbanus and the Easter Controversy: Theological, Social and Political Contexts," in *The Irish in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Roy Flechner and Sven Meeder (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 101–15.

[34] Torino, Biblioteca Nazionale, G. V. 38 and G. VII. 16.

[35] Digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/1346.

[36] Walker, ed., Columbanus, *Opera*, xxxv.

The first letter became famous because in it Columbanus addresses Pope Gregory the Great as the "most honoured Flower of all Europe."[37] This is the first time that the idea emerges that the pope unites the whole of Europe. Columbanus revisits this image in a slightly modified form in Letter 5 to Pope Boniface, addressing him as "the most fair Head of all the Churches of the whole of Europe."[38]

Columbanus's rules, his penitential and his letters confirm the picture that emerges from the *Vita Columbani*: he was a strict and ascetic figure, an abbot who addressed rulers and popes with confidence and even criticised them, as well as a highly influential and charismatic figure.[39] That must have been the reason why he attracted so many young men and boys to his monasteries in Annegray, Luxeuil, Fontaine and Bobbio, and even—when he was still a young man himself—to Bangor, where he was not an abbot but a teacher. There, a young boy named Gallus joined him. Gallus later became the spiritual founder of the monastery of St Gall. There has been some debate amongst scholars as to whether Gallus was in fact Irish and trained in Bangor, or whether he joined Columbanus at Luxeuil.[40] I find the arguments in favour of Gallus's Irish origins more convincing than those that cast doubt on this. However, this is not the context to reopen this debate here. More important is the fact that Gallus is portrayed as Irish in the biographies written about him in the 9th century.

Gallus and Columbanus

There are three versions of the "Life of Saint Gall" (*Vita sancti Galli*). The core of the oldest version (*Vetustissima*),[41] whose author is unknown, may have been

[37] Walker, ed., Columbanus, *Opera*, 3.

[38] Walker, ed., Columbanus, *Opera*, 37.

[39] Columbanus also wrote thirteen Sermons, transcribed by Metzler too (critical edition: Walker, ed., Columbanus, *Opera*, 60–121). The sermons can be found in several medieval manuscripts (Walker, ed., Columbanus, *Opera*, xxxix–xl). They were more frequently copied than the letters, which had a more personal touch. A few poems, rhythmical and metrical, are ascribed to him in medieval manuscripts, but their authenticity—especially of the metrical poems—has been contested. For a discussion of the metrical poems, see Michael Lapidge, "Epilogue: Did Columbanus Compose Metrical Verse?" in *Columbanus: Studies on the Latin Writings*, ed. Michael Lapidge (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1997), 274–85.

[40] Gerold Hilty, *Gallus und die Sprachgeschichte der Nordostschweiz* (St. Gallen: VGS Verlagsgemeinschaft St. Gallen, 2001), 120–24 believes that Gallus originally came from the Vosges or Alsace. His arguments are challenged by Ernst Tremp, "Columbans Vermächtnis im Widerstreit. Die Rechtfertigungsrede des Gallus vor der Gesandtschaft aus Luxeuil im Jahr 629," in *Gallus und seine Zeit: Leben, Wirken, Nachleben*, ed. Franziska Schnoor, Karl Schmuki, Ernst Tremp, Peter Erhart and Jakob Kuratli Hüeblin (St. Gallen: Verlag am Klosterhof, 2015), 244, 256–57.

[41] Critical edition: *Vita sancti Galli vetustissima*, in *Passiones vitaeque sanctorum aevi Merovingici*, vol. 2, ed. Bruno Krusch. Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum 4 (Hannover: Hahn, 1902), 251–56. Facsimile, edition and German

written as early as around forty years after Gallus's death, around 680.[42] Unfortunately, this version survives only in fragments, namely in the form of two bifolios from a passionary, which was probably not compiled after the mid-9th century and originally comprised more than ninety lives of saints (Cod. Sang. 2106).[43] As the first chapters have not survived, the fragments of this oldest version contain no indication of Gallus's origins.

The second version was composed between 816 and 824 by Wetti, a monk and teacher at Reichenau Abbey.[44] He wrote his *Vita sancti Galli* at the behest of Abbot Gozbert of St Gall, whose name, together with Wetti's own, is mentioned in an acrostic in the metrical prologue.[45] This second version of the *Vita sancti Galli* does not seem to have been very popular at the monastery of St Gall, probably due to Wetti's idiosyncratic style; only a single manuscript of it has survived. It is the same manuscript that also contains the *Vita Columbani* (Cod. Sang. 553).[46] Wetti reports that Gallus grew up in Ireland, was taught by Columbanus, and joined him when he left Ireland (Wetti, *Vita sancti Galli* 1–2).

Less than twenty years later, in 833 or 834, Abbot Gozbert—who had commissioned Wetti's version of the *Life of Gallus*—and the monks of St Gall tasked Walahfrid Strabo, a former pupil of Wetti's (who later became Abbot of Reichenau), with revising Wetti's text.[47] Walahfrid fulfilled this commission masterfully, and his *Vita sancti Galli* enjoyed great popularity in the Middle Ages. At least 75 manuscripts containing Walahfrid's *Vita* survive today.[48] The oldest codex (Cod. Sang. 562, written in St Gall around 890/900)[49] is a beautiful

translation: *Vita sancti Galli vetustissima. Die älteste Lebensbeschreibung des heiligen Gallus. Lateinisch/Deutsch*, ed. Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen (St. Gallen: Verlag am Klosterhof, 2012).

[42] Raphael Schwitter, "Zur Entstehungszeit der ältesten Teile der Vita s. Galli," *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 47 (2011), 185–200, suggests a later date (720/725). Walter Berschin, "Zur Entstehungszeit der ältesten Teile der Vita S. Galli," *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 46 (2012): 1–4, repeats arguments in favour of the traditional early dating, followed by Ernst Tremp in his "Einleitung" (introduction) in *Vita sancti Galli vetustissima*, ed. Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen, 8–9.

[43] Digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/2106.

[44] As Reichenau Abbey was situated on an island in Lake Constance, only about 45 kilometres from St. Gallen, there were very close ties between the two monasteries. Critical edition of Wetti's *Vita*: Wetti, *Vita sancti Galli*, in *Passiones*, ed. Krusch, 256–80.

[45] The acrostic reads: *Cozberto patri Wettinus* ("Wetti [dedicates this] to Father Gozbert").

[46] Digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/0553.

[47] Critical edition: Walahfrid Strabo, *Vita sancti Galli*, in *Passiones vitaeque sanctorum aevi Merovingici et antiquiorum aliquot*, ed. Bruno Krusch, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* 4 (Hanover: Hahn, 1902), 280–337. Edition and German translation: Walahfrid Strabo, *Vita sancti Galli. Das Leben des heiligen Gallus. Lateinisch/Deutsch*, trans. Franziska Schnoor (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2012).

[48] Walter Berschin, *Biographie und Epochenstil im lateinischen Mittelalter*, vol. 3, *Karolingische Biographie, 750–920 n. Chr.* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1991), 286.

[49] Description: Scarpatetti, *Codices 547–669*, 48–50; digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/0562.

manuscript lavishly decorated with initials painted in gold, silver, and minium. It was of great importance to the monastery, as it contained the life story of its spiritual founder. The wide margins underscore its value—one would not waste almost half the parchment surface on blank margins if the text written on the parchment were not absolutely worth it.

Walahfrid emphasises the importance of Columbanus as Gallus's abbot and teacher. The opening of the first chapter might even give the impression that it describes the life of Columbanus, whose name is mentioned twice in the very first sentence, long before Gallus's name appears. Columbanus plays an important role overall in the first chapters of the *Vita sancti Galli*, which are largely modelled on the *Vita Columbani* by Jonas of Bobbio (Walahfrid, *Vita sancti Galli* 1.1–6). Walahfrid (and his predecessor Wetti) do not write as extensively about Columbanus's travels on the continent as Jonas does, since, for them, this part of the story serves merely as a prelude to Gallus's own story, which began when Columbanus moved from Bregenz to Italy and Gallus parted ways with him.[50]

Gallus asked Columbanus for permission to stay behind, as he was ill. Although Columbanus himself often sought solitude, he was not necessarily willing to grant this privilege to his monks as well. Nevertheless, he reluctantly gave Gallus permission to stay behind and live as a hermit but punished him by forbidding him to celebrate Mass for as long as Columbanus lived (Walahfrid, *Vita sancti Galli* 1.9).[51] Gallus remained by Lake Constance, where he was nursed back to health by a local deacon, and once he had fully recovered, he asked the deacon to show him a spot in the wilderness where he could build a hermitage (Walahfrid, *Vita sancti Galli* 1.10–11). Even though he wanted to live as a hermit, he was never entirely alone—the deacon who had brought him into the wilderness stayed with him, and Gallus soon attracted other people who joined him to lead a monastic life.

None of the three extant versions of the *Vita sancti Galli* explicitly mentions a rule by which Gallus and his small community lived. However, it is reasonable to assume that they adhered to the rules established by Columbanus, possibly

[50] The *Lives* of Columbanus and Gallus differ as to the reason why Columbanus left Bregenz. While Jonas attributes it to political circumstances (Jonas, *Vita sancti Columbani* 1.28–29), Wetti and Walahfrid blame the pagan inhabitants of Bregenz, who killed two of the Irish monks, and the Alemannic count Gunzo, who drove Columbanus and his monks away. According to Walahfrid, the people of Bregenz rejected the methods by which the Irish, and Gallus in particular, sought to convert them to Christianity. When Gallus preached to the pagans, he destroyed three pagan idols and threw the fragments into Lake Constance (Walahfrid, *Vita sancti Galli* 1.8).

[51] In the oldest version of the *Life of Gallus*, the *Vetustissima*, this is even described as *excommunicatio* ("excommunication"), a term that neither Wetti nor Walahfrid use, perhaps because it seemed too harsh to them. See Ernst Tremp's comment on Walahfrid, *Vita sancti Galli* 1.9 in Walahfrid, *Vita sancti Galli*, trans. Schnoor, 200–1.

combined with elements of the Rule of Saint Benedict.[52] The latter was not officially adopted until more than a century after Gallus's death.[53]

Irish Pilgrims Visit St Gall

After Gallus's death, his grave became a place of pilgrimage where people from near and far, including Irish pilgrims, sought healing from illnesses and ailments. In the final chapter of the second book of his *Vita sancti Galli* (2.46), Walahfrid mentions a group of Irishmen who came to the monastery of St Gall: "Recently, a number of Irishmen—for whom the habit of pilgrimage has almost become second nature—came to the monastery and left behind one of their number, who had been afflicted by various illnesses." One night, the ailing Irishman had a vision of Gallus and complained to him about his physical frailty, saying: "I believe I have been spared so that your merits may also become known to the people of your nation." He remained in the monastery and was still living there when Walahfrid wrote the *Vita* in 833 or 834.

This passage is very important for two reasons: firstly, it shows that in Walahfrid's time, *peregrinatio*—that is, travelling and the search for an ascetic exile far from home—was regarded as a characteristic trait of the Irish. Secondly, it suggests that it took some time for Gallus's fame to reach Ireland. We do not know whether the group of Irishmen mentioned by Walahfrid in this chapter came to the monastery because they had heard of Gallus, or simply because St Gall was conveniently situated on the route to Rome, the destination of many pilgrims.

St Gall owes a great deal to the Irish pilgrims who came to the monastery in the 9th and 10th centuries. Unlike the *peregrini* of the 6th and 7th centuries, such as Columbanus and his companions, they did not come as missionaries but were either forced to flee their monasteries due to Viking raids—particularly on the monasteries along the Irish coast—or passed through St Gall on their way to the Holy City of Rome. When they had to flee, they tried to save their most valuable possessions from the Vikings, which in many cases were books. Others brought

[52] Friedrich Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), 263–92, 645, sees evidence of the mixed rule in numerous monasteries throughout the Frankish Empire, particularly in the daughter foundations of Luxeuil. Albrecht Diem takes a critical view of this, arguing that the *regula sancti Benedicti vel sancti Columbani* does not refer to a set of monastic rules, but rather to a specific "monastic way of life." See Albrecht Diem, "Die 'Regula Columbani' und die 'Regula sancti Galli': Überlegungen zu den Gallusviten in ihrem karolingischen Kontext," in *Gallus und seine Zeit: Leben, Wirken, Nachleben*, ed. Franziska Schnoor, Karl Schmuki, Ernst Tremp, Peter Erhart, and Jakob Kuratli Hüeblin (St. Gallen: Verlag am Klosterhof, 2015), 67–73, 96–97.

[53] According to Walahfrid Strabo's *Vita sancti Galli* (2.10), the Rule of St Benedict was introduced in 747 or shortly thereafter. Diem, "Regula Columbani," 79, regards Walahfrid's account as anachronistic and points out that the earliest charter from the monastery of St Gall mentioning the Rule of St Benedict was not issued until 779.

books with them as gifts for their hosts in St Gall. In this way, numerous Irish manuscripts made their way from Ireland to St Gall. Today, the Abbey Library of St Gall owns one of the largest collections of early medieval Irish manuscripts and fragments still in existence.[54] Very few manuscripts produced in Ireland in the early Middle Ages have survived. The Irish monasteries, where manuscripts were produced and stored, were repeatedly raided by Vikings and were later destroyed.[55] Manuscripts that were brought to the European continent during the Middle Ages thus had better chances of survival.

The two Irishmen about whom we know the most were a bishop named Marcus and his nephew Móengal. They arrived at the monastery of St Gall around the year 850 on their return from a pilgrimage to Rome and both remained there, much to the dismay of their companions, who had to return to Ireland alone. Ekkehard IV, a monk of St Gall († after 1057), mentions them in the second chapter of his monastic chronicle, the *Casus sancti Galli*.[56] Móengal was given the nickname Marcellus—"little Marcus"—by the monks at St Gall, after his uncle's name. He became a teacher at the monastery school, where he taught pupils such as Notker Balbulus, Tuotilo, and Ratpert, who later became famous themselves through their literary works. Marcellus also copied a codex containing several books of the Bible (Zürich, Zentralbibliothek, MS C 57) and wrote several charters for the monastery. Four documents written by him, dating from 853 to 860, are preserved in the Abbey Archives of St Gall (St. Gallen, Stiftsarchiv, Bremen 210, III 210, III 215, and III 233).[57] Interestingly, the manuscript and the charters he wrote show hardly any characteristics of Irish script, suggesting that Marcellus

[54] The Abbey Library of St Gall houses about a dozen Irish codices and fragments, thus surpassing in size even the collection of Trinity College, Dublin. Only the Badische Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe possesses a greater number of Irish manuscripts and fragments. A useful overview of evidence for early Irish book culture (c.600–1000) is given by the website "Manuscripts with Irish Associations (MIrA)," www.mira.ie. The fragments Cod. Sang. 1395, pp. 418–19, 422–23 and 426–27 [new shelf marks: Cod. Sang. 1395, Heft 19–21], counted as one item in the MIrA list, must be counted as three items, as they did not derive from the same manuscript. The origin of Cod. Sang. 1399 a 1 is uncertain; it might have been written either in Ireland or in an Irish centre on the continent.

[55] See Donnchadh Ó Corráin, "What Happened Ireland's Medieval Manuscripts?" *Peritia. Journal of the Medieval Academy of Ireland* 22–23, no. 1 (2011–2012): 191–223, https://doi.org/10.1484/J.PERIT.1.103287. Here, Ó Corráin argues that more Irish manuscripts were destroyed as a consequence of English conquest and colonialism than by Viking wars.

[56] Critical edition and German translation: Ekkehart IV., *St. Galler Klostergeschichten (Casus sancti Galli)*, ed. and trans. Hans F. Haefele (†) and Ernst Tremp with Franziska Schnoor. Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi 82 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2020), 118–21.

[57] Karl Schmuki, "Guests and Teachers from Ireland at the Abbey of St Gall," in *The Cradle of European Culture: Early Medieval Irish Book Art*, ed. Cornel Dora and Franziska Schnoor (St. Gallen: Verlag am Klosterhof, 2018), 98.

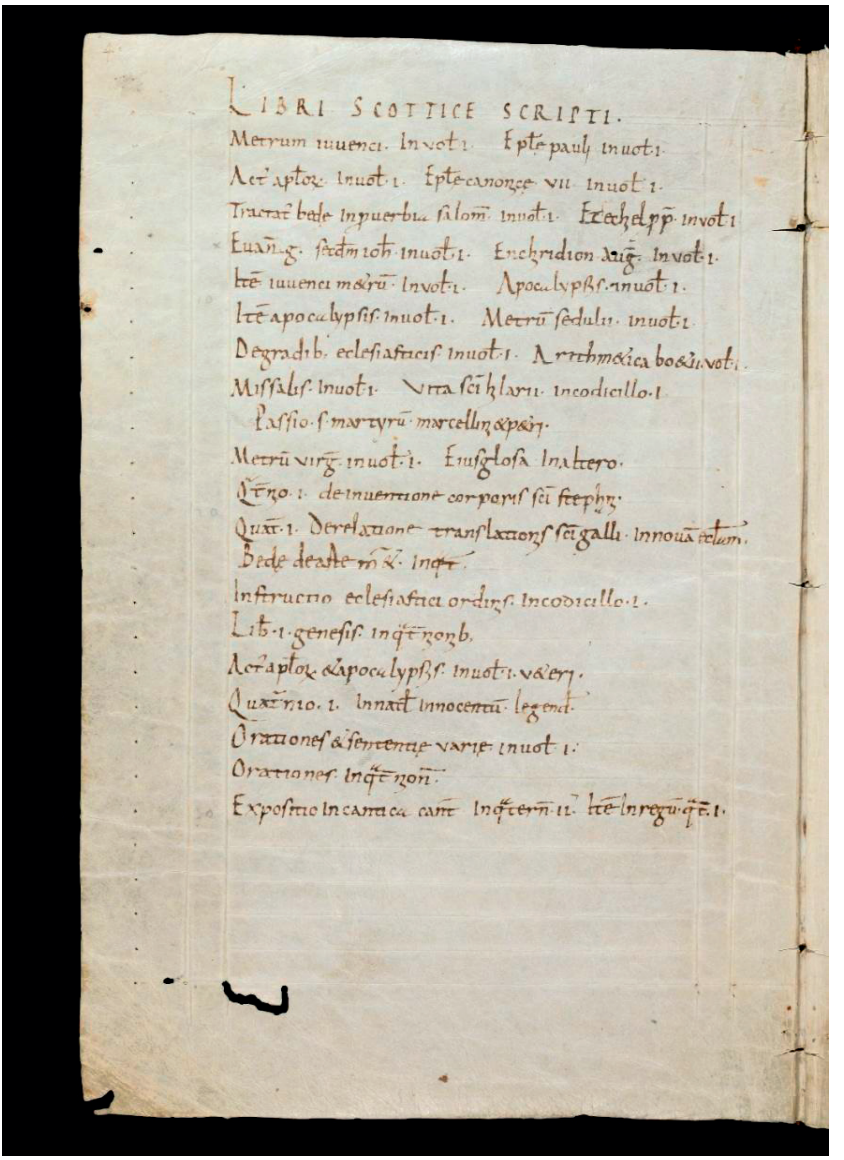
adapted very quickly to the Carolingian minuscule that was in use in St Gall at that time.

Ekkehard mentions that Marcus brought books with him and donated them to the monastery. It is tempting to believe that one of these books was a bilingual Gospel book, written in Greek and containing an interlinear translation into Latin. It was probably copied in Bobbio, the monastery founded by Columbanus in northern Italy, by an Irish scribe, as it is written in Irish minuscule. In addition, it contains some supplementary texts at the beginning and end of the manuscript written in a script typical of northern Italy. This codex is one of three bilingual manuscripts containing biblical texts. The other two, a Psalter and the Epistles of Paul, are now held in Basel (Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. A VII 3) and Dresden (Sächsische Staatsbibliothek, Mscr.Dresd.A.145.b). However, the bilingual manuscript is not mentioned in St Gall until the manuscript catalogue of 1461.[58]

We know of several other Irish manuscripts that were brought to St Gall, even though most of them no longer exist today. They are mentioned in a list of thirty manuscripts in Irish script (*Libri scottice scripti*), which precedes the oldest library catalogue of the monastery of St Gall, compiled between 860 and 865.[59] This raises the question of why the Irish manuscripts were mentioned separately—were they also kept in a special place in the library? And if so, were they segregated from the rest of the library out of reverence, or because their script was difficult for the monks at St Gall to read, therefore rendering them useless? In fact, it may well have been a combination of both reasons.

[58] Sven Meeder, *The Irish Scholarly Presence at St. Gall: Networks of Knowledge in the Early Middle Ages* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 46–51, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350038905; Philipp Lenz, "A Greek Gospel Book with Interlinear Latin Translation," in *The Cradle of European Culture: Early Medieval Irish Book Art*, ed. Cornel Dora and Franziska Schnoor (St. Gallen: Verlag am Klosterhof, 2018), 36.

[59] The list is found on p. 4, the library catalogue on pp. 5–21 of Cod. Sang. 728; digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/0728.



Ill. 1: The list of *Libri scottice scripti* (“Manuscripts in Irish script”) in Cod. Sang. 728, p. 4.

Manuscripts in Irish script

1. The Metrical work of Iuvencus, in one bound volume.
2. The Epistles of St Paul, in a single bound volume.
3. The Acts of the Apostles, in one bound volume.
4. The Seven Catholic Epistles, in one bound volume.
5. Treatise of Bede on the Proverbs of Solomon, in one bound volume.
6. The Prophet Ezekiel, in one bound volume.
7. The Gospel according to John, in one bound volume.
8. The *Enchiridion* of Augustine, in one bound volume.
9. Likewise, the Metrical work of Iuvencus, in one bound volume.
10. The Apocalypse, in one bound volume.
11. Likewise, the Apocalypse, in one bound volume.
12. The metrical work of Sedulius, in one bound volume.
13. On Church orders in one bound volume.
14. The *Arithmetic* of Boethius, in one bound volume.
15. A Missal, in one bound volume.
16. The Life of Saint Hilary, in one small codex.
17. The Passion of the holy martyrs Marcellinus and Peter.
18. The poetry [poetic composition] of Virgil, in one bound volume.
19. A gloss of the same work, in another [volume].
20. One unbound text on the finding of the body of Saint Stephen.
21. One unbound text on the account of the translation of St Gall into the new church.
22. Bede *De arte metrica*, in one unbound text.
23. Instruction of Church Order, in one small codex.
24. Book 1 Genesis, in unbound texts.
25. The Acts of the Apostles and the Apocalypse, in one old bound volume.
26. One unbound text for the reading of the feast day of the Innocents.
27. Prayers and various sentences, in one bound volume.
28. Prayers, in an unbound set.
29. Exposition on the Canticle of Canticles, in two unbound sets.
30. Likewise [an exposition] on [the Books of] Kings, one unbound set.

Tab. 1: The list of *Libri scottice scripti* ("Manuscripts in Irish script") in Cod. Sang. 728, p. 4.[60]

The largest group among the *Libri scottice scripti* consists of manuscripts containing books of the Bible, nine in total. Except for the Book of Genesis and the

[60] Translations of the Latin titles: Martin McNamara, *The Bible in the Early Irish Church: A.D. 550 to 850* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 235–40.

Book of Ezekiel, all of these are books of the New Testament. It is surprising that neither the Psalter nor the Gospels are included in the list, particularly given the presence of the aforementioned Greek and Latin Gospel book (Cod. Sang. 48). This may suggest that it was not, after all, brought to St Gall by Marcus and Móengal. Other types of text that frequently appear in the list are exegetical works, liturgical texts, and hagiographies. However, not all texts in the list are theological or related to the liturgy: there are a few treatises on the seven liberal arts, as well as several volumes of poetry by Christian authors such as Iuvencus and Sedulius, and also by the pagan Roman author Virgil, whose poems were frequently read due to their elegant Latin.

Most of the texts listed in the *Libri scottice scripti* appear to have been lost over the centuries; only a few of them can still be found among the manuscripts of the Abbey Library of St Gall. The only surviving complete manuscript is No. 7 on the list, "The Gospel according to John," which most likely refers to Cod. Sang. 60, a manuscript containing the Gospel of John in Irish script.[61] It begins with a lavishly illuminated double page (pp. 4–5). On the left-hand side is a depiction of John the Evangelist with his symbol, the eagle. On the right-hand side, the Gospel begins with the familiar words *In principio erat verbum*—which are not easy to decipher due to the highly idiosyncratic form of the Irish display capitals and the ligatures formed by the letters I, N, and P.

Other texts which have survived, do so only in the form of fragments. A bifolio containing parts of the Requiem Mass (Cod. Sang. 1395, pp. 430–33; Ireland, 750/800)[62] or a double-leaf with prayers and parts of the Mass canon (Cod. Sang. 1394, pp. 95–98; Ireland, 8th/9th century)[63] could be the remains of the missal mentioned under No. 15 in the list.

A bifolio containing prayers for the dying (Cod. Sang. 1395, pp. 444–47)[64] may be a fragment of one of the manuscripts of prayers mentioned under numbers 27 or 28. One of the pages bears an 18th-century signature ("S. n. 271"); this is the old signature of an early 10th-century manuscript containing a commentary on the Books of Kings, now Cod. Sang. 284. Traces of glue on the fragment suggest that it was once affixed as a pastedown to the inside of the wooden book cover of Cod. Sang. 284. As this manuscript is still in its original 10th-century binding, it

[61] Digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/0060.

[62] New shelf mark: Cod. Sang. 1395, Heft 22; digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/1395.

[63] New shelf mark: Cod. Sang. 1394, Heft 9, pp. 1–4; digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/1394. The embolism, a short prayer said after the Lord's Prayer (p. 97), mentions Saint Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland: *Libera nos, domine, ab omni malo praeterito, praesenti et future et intercedentibus pro nobis beatis apostolis Petro et Paulo et Patricio episcopo da propitius pacem tuam in diebus nostris* [...] ("Deliver us, Lord, from every evil, past, present, and future, and by the intercession of the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul and of Bishop Patrick, mercifully grant peace in our days").

[64] New shelf mark: Cod. Sang. 1395, Heft 24; digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/1395.

can be assumed that the fragment was already used by the bookbinder around 925. This suggests that the Irish prayer book from which the fragment originates did not survive in its original form for long.

The attribution of No. 2, the Epistles of St Paul, is rather uncertain. Could the single leaf from the Epistle to the Colossians, bearing marginal glosses (Cod. Sang. 1395, pp. 440–41),[65] be a fragment of this codex? It is possible, although the glosses would probably have been mentioned in the list; hence, the manuscript listed may well have been lost entirely.

On the other hand, the Abbey Library of St. Gall holds several Irish fragments and manuscripts that are not included in the list, for example a bifolio from the Gospel of Luke (Cod. Sang. 1394, pp. 101–4),[66] a single leaf featuring a beautiful drawing of the evangelist Matthew as a scribe (Cod. Sang. 1395, pp. 418–19), a leaf with an ornate cross (Cod. Sang. 1395, pp. 422–23) and a leaf with a large *Peccavimus* initial (Cod. Sang. 1395, pp. 426–27).[67] The three single leaves show stylistic and palaeographic similarities with manuscripts from the Irish midlands and from north-eastern Ireland.[68]

The Evangelist Matthew (Cod. Sang. 1395, p. 418)[69] is accompanied by his symbol, the angel.[70] In his right hand he holds a writing implement, probably a reed pen, and in his left hand a penknife, which was used to sharpen the reed pen and to erase mistakes. It cannot be said with certainty whether this leaf comes from a complete Gospel book. It may have been removed before its arrival in St Gall and used for other purposes. The verso of the leaf contains Old Irish and Latin incantations against wounds and other ailments, written by three different Irish scribes, which one would not expect to find in a Gospel book.

The leaf with the decorated cross may also have been part of a Gospel book, in which carpet pages are a common decorative feature. It appears that the carpet page was never completed; the empty spaces were probably also intended to be

[65] New shelf mark: Cod. Sang. 1395, Heft 23, pp. 3–4; digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/1395.

[66] New shelf mark: Cod. Sang. 1394, Heft 9, pp. 5–8; digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/1394.

[67] New shelf marks of the three single leaves: Cod. Sang. 1395, Heft 19–21; digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/1395.

[68] The three leaves are described and compared to other Irish manuscripts by Carol A. Farr, "Reused, Reused, Rescued, Recycled: The Art Historical and Paleographical Contexts of the Irish Fragments, St Gallen Codex 1395," in *An Insular Odyssey. Manuscript Culture in Early Christian Ireland and Beyond*, ed. Rachel Moss, Felicity O'Mahony and Jane Maxwell (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017), 175–93.

[69] New shelf mark: Cod. Sang. 1395, Heft 19, p. 1.

[70] This leaf has been analysed by Carol A. Farr, "Making Manuscripts: The St Matthew Page in St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 1395," in *Islands in a Global Context: Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on Insular Art, Held at the National University of Ireland, Galway, 16–20 July 2014*, ed. Conor Newman, Mags Mannion, and Fiona Gavin (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017), 55–64.

filled with elaborate interlacing patterns. On the verso are an exorcism and several blessings, including one for water and salt.

The *Peccavimus* initial page comes from a liturgical manuscript. It contains the prayer *Peccavimus domine, peccavimus* ("We have sinned, O Lord, we have sinned"), which begins on the recto and continues on the verso; on the verso, the prayer is followed by a litany. Here, too, the decoration appears unfinished—the empty spaces between the lines of capital letters were surely intended to be filled with knotwork or intertwined animals, just like the fields framing the page.

Ill. 2: The *Peccavimus* initial page (Cod. Sang. 1395, p. 426 [Cod. Sang. 1395, Heft 21, p. 1]).

Most of the manuscripts mentioned in the list of books in Irish script from the oldest library catalogue of St Gall have not survived, or have survived only as

fragments. It thus appears that the Irish manuscripts that were brought to the monastery were not read in St Gall, or were read only for a short time, before being discarded, cut apart and used as bookbinder's material. There are three exceptions:

Besides the Irish fragments, the Abbey Library of St Gall houses three complete Irish manuscripts: the aforementioned Gospel of John (Cod. Sang. 60), an 8th-century codex containing Priscian's Latin grammar with Irish glosses (Cod. Sang. 904; Nendrum [?], c.750)[71] and a complete Gospel book, known as the *Irish Gospels of St Gall* (Cod. Sang. 51).[72]

The *Irish Gospels of St Gall* contain twelve illuminated pages. Based on the style of the illuminations and the script, this manuscript is believed to have been produced in central Ireland around 780.[73] Each Gospel begins with a double page depicting the respective evangelist and the opening of the Gospel (pp. 2–3, 78–79, 128–29, 208–9). There are two further double pages: a carpet page, opposite which is a large decorated initial, separates the genealogy of Christ (Mt 1:1–17) from the rest of the Gospel of Matthew (pp. 6–7). A double page depicting the crucifixion of Christ and the Last Judgement is located at the very end of the manuscript (pp. 266–67).

The text of the four Gospels is a uniquely Irish hybrid form combining elements of the Vulgate and the *Vetus Latina*.[74] It would be interesting to investigate whether certain readings from this manuscript found their way into the Gospel manuscripts produced in St Gall in the 9th century. Yet the opposite seems to be the case. The Irish Gospels contain several corrections in Carolingian minuscule, which were probably made by several scribes from St Gall in the second half of the 9th century. The script of one particularly lengthy correction (Cod. Sang. 51, p. 39) is reminiscent of some of the notes in the oldest library catalogue (Cod. Sang. 728, pp. 5–21), which were probably inserted into the catalogue around 890

[71] Digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/0904.

[72] Digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/0051. Facsimile: Joseph J. Flahive, *The St Gall Gospels. Sankt Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Codex 51*. Part 1, *Facsimile*. Irish Manuscripts in Facsimile 2 (Cork: ArCH Project, Department of History, University College Cork, 2009).

[73] Cornel Dora, "The Irish Gospels of St Gall and Its Family," in *The Cradle of European Culture: Early Medieval Irish Book Art*, ed. Cornel Dora and Franziska Schnoor (St. Gallen: Verlag am Klosterhof, 2018), 75, 78. Farr, "Reused," 176, 183–84, 192.

[74] Martin McNamara, "Bible Text and Illumination in St Gall Stiftsbibliothek Codex 51, with Special Reference to Longinus in the Crucifixion Scene," in *Pattern and Purpose in Insular Art: Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Insular Art held at the National Museum & Gallery, Cardiff 3–6 September 1998*, ed. Mark Redknap, Nancy Edwards, Susan Youngs, Alan Lane and Jeremy Knight (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2001), 193–94; Martin McNamara, "Sankt Gallen Stiftsbibliothek Codex 51: With Special Reference to the Biblical Text of the Fourth Gospel," in *Ogma: Essays in Celtic Studies in Honour of Próinséas Ní Chatháin*, ed. Michael Richter and Jean-Michel Picard (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 265–67.

by the St Gall monk Notker Balbulus, the monastery's librarian at the time.[75] It is tempting to attribute the corrections in the *Irish Gospels of St Gall* to Notker Balbulus. He was a pupil of the Irishman Móengal (Marcellus), who might have encouraged him and his fellow students to read the Bible in Irish script and to apply their knowledge when correcting the biblical text. Yet even if we cannot attribute the corrections to any particular monk, they were certainly added at the monastery of St Gall. Thus, the Irish Gospels must have been studied at St Gall, even if they had no influence on the manuscripts produced in the St Gall scriptorium.

Remembering Columbanus at St Gallen

Returning to Columbanus, it is worth asking what influence he had on the monastery of St Gall. How was he remembered, and what role did his writings play? His rules were copied in the 9th century, together with the Rule of St Benedict, as part of the oldest Chapter Book and were probably read during the monks' assembly after Prime. They were even copied several times much later, in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries.[76] Apparently, they were part of the educational programme for novices in St Gall during the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

Columbanus himself was venerated as a saint in St Gallen. One of the altars in the first monastery church (built around 830) was dedicated to him. On the monastery plan dating from around 825/826 (Cod. Sang. 1092),[77] the altar is located in a very prominent position near the tomb of Gallus and directly opposite an altar dedicated to Saint Benedict of Nursia. The Liturgy of the Hours for Columbanus, however, was unremarkable. Most of the antiphons and responsories were taken from the *Commune unius confessoris*, the chants used for any saint in the "confessor" category, or from the Office of Saint Clement. The only three responsories

[75] Apart from the general ductus of the script, which is rather angular and slightly slanted, there is a detail that appears both in the emendation in Cod. Sang. 51 and in the notes in Cod. Sang. 728: the letters a and i, which are attached to a preceding consonant and extend below the baseline. This is a typical feature of Insular minuscule and may have been taught to Notker Balbulus and other monks at St Gall by the Irish teacher Marcellus (Móengal).

[76] Cod. Sang. 921, p. 311–15 (15th century); Cod. Sang. 1191, p. 289–316 (copied by P. Bernhard Hartmann in 1596); Cod. Sang. 1347, p. 13–35 and 40–60 (1696); Cod. Sang. 1348, p. 17–35 (1618).

[77] Digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/1092. Facsimile: *The Abbey Plan of St Gall: Facsimile, Commentary, Inscriptions with Translations*, ed. Abbey Library of St Gall, comm. Ernst Tremp (St. Gallen: Verlag am Klosterhof, 2020). On the dating, see Cornel Dora, "Der St. Galler Klosterplan. Ein Konzept der Reichenauer Mönche Reginbert und Walahfrid Strabo für den Gallus-Konvent," in *Welterbe des Mittelalters. 1300 Jahre Reichenau*, ed. Badisches Landesmuseum, vol. 1 (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2024), 303.

that are more personal are based not on the *Vita* of Columbanus, but on that of Gallus, and describe episodes in which Columbanus and Gallus appear together.[78]

Yet there is one liturgical work composed in St Gall that draws specifically on the *Vita Columbani*: the sequence *A solis occasu usque ad exortum*, which was sung during Mass between the Alleluia and the Gospel reading. It can be found in manuscripts from St Gall as early as *c.*925/950 (Cod. Sang. 381, p. 473).[79]

1. A solis occasu usque ad exortum	1. From the setting of the sun to its rising
2a. Est cunctis nomen tuum, deus, laudabile,	2a. Your name, o God, is worthy of praise by all people,
2b. Qui inde novum solem mittis mira lege,	2b. You who send forth a new sun by miraculous law,
3a. Qui lustret orbem radiis	3a. Who illumines the globe with its rays
3b. Et fotu terras vegetet.	3b. And with its warmth invigorates the earth.
4a. Hic Columbanus nomine columbinae vitae fuit,	4a. This man, named Columbanus, was dovelike in his life,
4b. Dignus habere spiritus sancti pignus in hac vita.	4b. And he was worthy to hold the pledge of the Holy Spirit in his life.
5a. Hic terram cum Abraham reliquit et cognatos propter deum.	5a. Like Abraham, for the sake of God he relinquished his land and his kinsmen;
5b. Hic cum Johanne regis incestum increpare non metuit.	5b. Like John, no fear kept him from rebuking the incest of the king.
6a. Huic pastum dat deus in deserto cum Moyse.	6a. Like Moses, to him God gave nourishment in the desert;
6b. Huic caelum obsequi est paratum cum Josue.	6b. Like Joshua, it was intended for him to serve heaven.
7a. Hic feras mansuefacit et corvos ut Helias et Danihel.	

[78] The responsories *Serve bone et fidelis* (introduced in the 13th century), *Iste homo ab adolescentia*, *Iste homo perfecit omnia*, and *Dominus qui elegit te*, as well as the antiphon *In lege domini*, are taken from the *Commune unius Confessoris*. The antiphon *Regem sanctorum dominum* originally belongs to the Office for St Clement. The responsories *Parentes vero*, *Columbanus itaque* and *Vir Deo plenus* are taken from the Office for St Gallus.

[79] Digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/0381. Ekkehart IV ascribes the sequence to the St Gall monk Ekkehart I (910–973) in his *Casus sancti Galli*, ch. 80. This attribution is, however, doubtful, since Ekkehart I did not enter the monastery of St Gall until 932, and yet *A solis occasu* can be found in every 10th-century manuscript containing the East Frankish repertoire of sequences. The sequence was probably composed earlier. Notker Balbulus, *The Liber Ymnorum of Notker Balbulus*, ed. Calvin M. Bower, vol. 2, *Commentary* (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 2016), 186.

7b. Hic persecutiones cum apostolis Christi perpetitur.	7a. Like Elijah and Daniel he tamed beasts and ravens;
8a. Huic ipse veritatis hostis nutu dei	7b. Like the apostles of Christ he endured persecution.
8b. Testatur, quod hic veriatis cultor foret.	8a. Of this one, the enemy of truth himself – by the will of God –
9a. Nos ergo tete poscimus,	8b. Bears witness, that he was guardian of truth.
9b. Beate, quo nos domino	9a. Thus to you we call,
10. tu commendes.	9b. O blessed one, that you
	10. Commend us to the Lord.

Tab. 2: *A solis occasu usque ad exortum*, sequence for the feast of Columbanus.[80]

The sequence begins with an allusion to Ps 113:3 (*ab ortu solis usque ad occasum eius laudabile nomen Domini*—"From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the Lord is to be praised!") but changes the cardinal directions, as Columbanus came from the west, the place of the setting sun. Verse 4a explains the meaning of the name Columbanus as "leading a life like a dove," alluding to Mt 10:16 ("Be as innocent as doves"). In verse 5a, it is mentioned that Columbanus left his homeland, just as Abraham did.[81] Verse 5b compares Columbanus to John the Baptist, as both denounced a ruler's illicit relationship with a woman and suffered persecution as a result of their outspoken criticism. Herod, who was involved with Herodias, his brother's wife, had John the Baptist put to death;[82] King Theuderich, who had several concubines, had Columbanus expelled from the Frankish Kingdom. Verse 6 alludes to several miracles involving food, and verse 7 refers to the power Columbanus had over animals—ravens that brought him food, as well as bears that obeyed the saint when he spoke to them. The sequence mentions neither the monasteries founded by Columbanus nor the rules he drew up for his monks. Instead, the author focuses on Columbanus's ascetic exile—something with which the monks in St Gall could identify, as it also applied to Gallus—his conflicts with the Merovingian rulers, and the miracles associated with food and animals.

A solis occasu, the sequence for the feast of Columbanus, was very popular in St Gall. Not only was it included in several manuscripts from the 10th and 11th

[80] Translation: Notker Balbulus, *The Liber Ymnorum of Notker Balbulus*, ed. Calvin M. Bower, vol. 2, *Commentary* (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 2016), 183–84. Edition of the text and the melody: Notker Balbulus, *The Liber Ymnorum of Notker Balbulus*, ed. Calvin M. Bower, vol. 1, *Text and Music* (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 2016), 267–69.

[81] God's command to Abraham is quoted by Jonas in the *Vita Columbani* 1.4.

[82] Mt 4:3–12; Mk 6:14–29; Lk 3:19–20.

centuries,[83] but its melody was later transcribed from adiastematic neumes into musical notation on staves (Cod. Sang. 546, fol. 210r; St Gall, 1507/1514);[84] thus the sequence can be sung today.

Conclusion

The Irish abbot Columbanus left his mark on Europe in the early Middle Ages by founding several monasteries in the Frankish Empire, from which further daughter monasteries were subsequently established. His monastic rules played a role in the monasteries of the Frankish Empire, particularly in the early Middle Ages. However, as the example of the monastery of St Gall, which traces its origins back to his pupil Gallus, shows, his influence was limited. Although Columbanus's rules were read at St Gall until the 17th century, the monks had been following the Rule of St Benedict since at least the Carolingian period. Nevertheless, the connection between Ireland and St Gall remained alive, as Irish pilgrims regularly visited Gallus's grave. It is to them that the Abbey Library of St Gall owes its exceptionally large collection of early medieval Irish manuscripts. The list of *Libri scottice scripti* in the oldest library catalogue, dating from the 9th century, shows that there were once far more Irish books in the monastery of St Gall, but that these have been lost over the centuries. The manuscripts preserved today are one of the Abbey Library's special treasures and a magnet for visitors from all over the world. Today, it is primarily Irish book illumination, rather than Irish theology, that seems to bring people together. Yet the aesthetic appeal of Irish manuscripts, which has an immediate impact on the viewer, provides an opportunity for a deeper engagement with the underlying principles of Irish monasticism. Although the ideals of Columbanus may seem excessively harsh today, and the idea of mission or values such as asceticism and absolute obedience are rightly viewed with scepticism, in moderation they may help to counteract selfishness and wastefulness. Finally, the idea of a united Europe, first expressed in Columbanus's letters, serves as a reminder that the future too lies in exchange between peoples and in joint, cross-border collaboration.

[83] Cod. Sang. 375 (11th century), p. 313; Cod. Sang. 376 (11th century), p. 408; Cod. Sang. 378 (11th century), p. 285; Cod. Sang. 380 (11th century), p. 233; Cod. Sang. 381 (10th century), p. 473; Cod. Sang. 382 (11th century), p. 183.

[84] Digitised manuscript: www.e-codices.ch/en/csg/0546.

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THEOLOGY, EUROPE, AND THE PERSISTENCE OF WAR

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of *Zeitenwende* ("turning point") through the lens of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, arguing that contemporary political and theological debates reveal competing understandings of history that shape European identity. Against claims that post-1989 liberal democracy represented what Francis Fukuyama called the "end of history," the paper draws on Timothy Snyder's distinction between the "politics of inevitability" and the "politics of eternity" to interpret the resurgence of authoritarian nationalism, historical revisionism, and anti-pluralist ideologies in Russia, the United States, and Europe. It argues that both liberal optimism and nostalgic nationalism distort history either by assuming inevitable progress or creating a mythical past. As an alternative, it proposes a "politics of responsibility," grounded in critical engagement with the constraints of history.

To develop this argument, the paper compares the contemporary crisis with earlier European turning points following the First and Second World Wars. It examines theological debates between Ernst Troeltsch and Friedrich Gogarten after 1918, highlighting contrasting responses to historical crisis, and considers Roberto Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero* alongside post-war theological movements that reasserted the importance of history after 1945. These case studies demonstrate that periods of rupture never constitute a complete break with the past but instead demand renewed historical reflection and ethical responsibility. The paper concludes that an incarnational theology cannot abandon history for either ideological certainty or apocalyptic escape. Instead, theologians and political leaders alike should embrace historical complexity, compromise, and truthful engagement with the past as essential foundations for responding to Europe's contemporary crises.

Keywords: *Zeitenwende*; political theology; politics of responsibility; anti-pluralism; Ernst Troeltsch; Friedrich Gogarten.

When this chapter was first delivered as a paper in August 2025, there had been unprecedentedly rapid changes in international relations since the inauguration of

President Trump at the beginning of the year: the old world seemed to be passing away, and a new more transactional and far less predictable period seemed to be dawning. This continued into early 2026: questions about European identity were being forced on the continent from an increasingly erratic and hostile ally, or perhaps former ally. The US National Security Strategy that was produced in November 2025 spoke of economic decline as well as "the real and more stark prospect of civilizational erasure" for which it blames "activities of the European Union and other transnational bodies that undermine political liberty and sovereignty, migration policies that are transforming the continent and creating strife, censorship of free speech and suppression of political opposition, cratering birthrates, and loss of national identities and self-confidence." In turn, the strategy sought to promote what it called "the revival spirit" of the anti-pluralist far right, welcoming "the growing influence of patriotic European parties."[1] Echoing the Munich speech of J. D. Vance in February 2025, it is patently a troubling document that draws on rhetoric from the extreme right and appears to align American goals with those of the Kremlin in disrupting the European ideal and threatening liberal democracy. Nevertheless, it does raise one simple question: what does it mean to be European? What, if any, are the shared values that shape the continent, and how far have these been challenged in recent years, most especially by the war in Ukraine? Are we seeing a fundamental change in history and the end of "the West" and the realignment of the world into different alliances, as Timothy Garton Ash and his collaborators have recently suggested, based on global opinion polling?[2] Is this a rupture in history, as Mark Carney suggested at the Davos Conference in January 2026?[3]

To offer some somewhat sideways answers to these questions, I want to begin with an address to the Bundestag given by the then German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on 27 February 2022, three days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The invasion, he claimed, marked a *Zeitenwende*, a "turning of the times in the history of our continent." "War in Europe," which for many young people was "scarcely believable," was taking place. He continued:

> We are living through a *Zeitenwende.* And that means: the world afterwards is not the same as the world that was there beforehand

[1] *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, November 2025), 26, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf.

[2] Timothy Garton Ash, Ivan Krastev, and Mark Leonard, "How Trump is Making China Great Again—And What It Means for Europe" (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, January 2026), https://europeanmoments.com/sites/default/files/2026-01/How-Trump-is-making-China-great-again-202601.pdf.

[3] Mark Carney, "Speech to the Global Economic Forum," January 20, 2026, *Global News*, accessed 22 January 2026, https://globalnews.ca/news/11620877/carney-davos-wef-speech-transcript/.

> … At its heart the question is whether power can be allowed to break the law, whether we allow Putin to turn the clocks back to the time of the great powers of the nineteenth century; or whether we are able to have the strength to keep warmongers like Putin in check. That requires strength of our own.

Ukraine, he went on, was fighting for its freedom and democracy against an autocratic foe: "As democrats, as Europeans we stand by her side, on the right side of history." Throughout the speech Scholz was clear that the invasion of Ukraine represented an abrupt break with the past as two historical narratives were positioned against one another: the first was a history constructed on the "broad social and political consensus" of the enlightened principles of freedom and democracy; the other was based on what he called Putin's "historicizing treatises" which were evidence enough of his desire to "establish a Russian Empire." The question was whether the achievements of the previous thirty years following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites and the establishment of a new Europe based on democratic principles could be saved.[4]

For Scholz, and for many other liberal-minded politicians in Germany, including his eventual successor Friedrich Merz, what was happening on European soil in Ukraine was patently a challenge to the interpretation of history famously popularised by Francis Fukuyama. In 1989, as deputy director of the State Department's policy planning staff, he had published a seminal article entitled "The End of History?"[5] Published only a few months before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, his article began with a rather prosaic claim: "In watching the flow of events over the past decade or so, it is hard to avoid the feeling that something very fundamental has happened in world history." After a century with two wars of unprecedented scale which had seen the "developed world descend into a paroxysm of ideological violence," there was a decisive change with the "triumph of the West, of the Western *idea*":

> The century that began full of self-confidence in the ultimate triumph of Western liberal democracy seems at its close to be returning full circle to where it started: not to an "end of ideology" or a

[4] Olaf Scholz, "Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz am 27. Februar 2022," Die Bundesregierung, accessed 22 January 2026, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/regierungserklaerung-von-bundeskanzler-olaf-scholz-am-27-februar-2022-2008356.

[5] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989): 3–18. I have addressed some of these themes in "The First World War and the End of History," in *Kirchengeschichte: Historisches Spezialgebiet und/oder theologische Disziplin (Wolfram Kinzig zum 60. Geburtstag)*, ed. Claudia Kampmann, Ulrich Volp, Martin Wallraff, and Julia Winnebeck (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2020), 265–82.

> convergence between capitalism and socialism, as earlier predicted, but to an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism.[6]

Such an unabashed victory amounts to a portrayal of history as progress based on what Timothy Snyder called "the politics of inevitability,"[7] which was expressed in the United Kingdom with the popular electoral campaign song of the first Blair Government in 1997: "Things can only get better."[8]

Fukuyama's key claim was that the world was witnessing the "end of history as such," the "end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."[9] While many others had earlier predicted that history would come to an end in more or less cataclysmic or revolutionary ways, Fukuyama thought that the late twentieth century was quite distinctive: liberal ideas had conquered the whole world and seemed invincible even against the foes of nationalism or authoritarianism.[10] His rather bleak conclusion was that the present was a struggle between those who continued to live in history and those who had entered "post-history" which would lead to struggles and small-scale wars: "In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history." In post-history, he suggested somewhat cryptically, there would be years of boredom, which in the end will "serve to get history started once again."[11]

Of course, Fukuyama's thesis, which he extended into a book, *The End of History and the Last Man*,[12] has been the subject of much criticism. Indeed, the 1990s may perhaps have been the last decade of liberal boredom: as Peter Heather and John Rapley note, the millennium festivities marked the high watermark of liberal economic and political hegemony when the West, with one-sixth of the world's population, collectively consumed 80 per cent of the world's output of goods and services. After the financial crash of 2008 this had quickly sunk to 60 per cent.[13] However, even though from the perspective of 2026 Fukuyama's thesis looks

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[6] Fukuyama, "The End of History?" 3.

[7] Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (London: Vintage Books, 2019), 7.

[8] See "Labour's 1997 Party Political Broadcast: Things Can Only Get Better," YouTube video, posted by "Great British Politics," June 4, 2015, accessed January 22, 2026. https://youtu.be/gi5j7jjhm4M.

[9] Fukuyama, "The End of History?" 4.

[10] Fukuyama, "The End of History?" 14–15.

[11] Fukuyama, "The End of History?" 18.

[12] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

[13] Peter Heather and John Rapley, *Why Empires Fall: Rome, America and the Future of the West* (London: Allen Lane, 2023), 10.

hubristic,[14] it is nevertheless important in helping understand the perceived *Zeitenwende* of 2022 with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In 1989, the old certainties of liberal democracies pitted against communist autocracies had come to an end to be definitively replaced by the final triumph of the West: the politics of inevitability based on markets and democratic rights seemed invulnerable. And yet, as events quickly revealed, history had not come to an end: the liberal institutions developed in the aftermath of the Second World War in the Bretton Woods system as well as the shared assumptions that are required to maintain them now seem extremely precarious.

Precarious History

All this means, as Olaf Scholz himself hinted, the *Zeitenwende* of 1989 may well have been illusory. It served to mask some of the other social and political developments that threatened the broadly popular consensus that had allowed global structures of government to function over a long period. Clearly the politics of inevitability had failed to perceive the historical importance of events and ideas that told a different story, which meant that 1989 was perhaps less the end of history and more a failure of many to engage critically with history. After all, a history that has ended can no longer trade in inconvenient facts. Beneath the surface, especially after the financial crash of 2008, there were clearly other forces at work which failed to be noticed, but which were equally dismissive of critical engagement with the past. These disparate ideas and movements can be grouped under the heading of what Snyder calls the "politics of eternity"[15] where there is a deliberate distancing from facts and academic expertise. In this understanding, history is little more than a repetition of "cycles of threat" and the creation of enemies both internal and external. For many politicians, as in both Putin's Russia and Trump's version of the United States, this creates an "imagined pattern that they realize in the present by producing artificial crises and daily drama."[16] Counter-narratives of history, what Scholz called Putin's "historicizing narratives," have quickly gained strong currency in the first decades of the twenty-first century, which is clearly evident from the rise of anti-cosmopolitan nationalist movements in Russia, in the United States, and across much of Europe, which Richard Seymour has recently labelled "disaster nationalism."[17] In an earlier article he had written: "We are living in a time of rupture. Most of these ruptures are coming from the authoritarian, nationalist right. Nationalist movements have realigned

[14] Heather and Rapley, *Why Empires Fall*, 126–27.
[15] Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 8.
[16] Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 9.
[17] Richard Seymour, *Disaster Nationalism: The Downfall of Liberal Civilisation* (London: Verso, 2024).

politics and incumbency has been remarkably generous to them, despite a frequently risible governing record."[18]

These new narratives of disaster nationalism are based on the "politics of eternity" and make use of a quite different conception of time from the politics of inevitability. As Timothy Snyder put it:

> Whereas inevitability promises a better future for everyone, eternity places one nation as the center of a cyclical story of victimhood. Time is no longer a line into the future, but a circle that endlessly returns the same threats from the past. Within inevitability, no one is responsible because we all know that the details will sort themselves out for the better; within eternity, no one is responsible because we all know that the enemy is coming no matter what we do. Eternity politicians spread the conviction that government cannot aid society as a whole, but can only guard against threats. Progress gives way to doom.[19]

In Russia, for instance, admittedly coming from the extreme end of the political spectrum, Alexander Dugin's *The Great Awakening vs. the Great Reset* has helped to frame a discourse of collective identity against what are perceived to be the disintegrating effects of liberalism and individualism: directed against the then Prince Charles's "Great Reset" at the 2020 Davos Conference with its emphasis on what Dugin calls "control over public consciousness on a global scale," emphasized by the COVID restrictions, and "transition to an ecological economy" and artificial intelligence,[20] the "Great Awakening" requires a return to the Eurasian imperial mission against what he calls the dominant "Atlantean" civilisation.[21] The role of Russia in this anti-globalisation "is not only to take an active part in the Great Awakening, but also to stand in the forefront of it, proclaiming the imperative of the *Internationale* of Peoples in the fight against liberalism, the plague of the twenty-first century"[22] which is reacting against the "murderous and suicidal strategy of 'progress' as the globalist elites understand it," and led by "a handful of degenerate and panting old globalist men on the verge of dementia (like Biden)."[23] In the US, Dugin presciently suggested, "we have a foothold in Trumpism."[24]

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[18] Richard Seymour, "The Rise of Disaster Nationalism: Why the Authoritarian Right is Resurgent," *New Statesman*, March 13–19, 2020, 22.
[19] Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 8.
[20] Alexander Dugin, *The Great Awakening vs. the Great Reset* (London: Arkos, 2021), 2.
[21] Dugin, *The Great Awakening*, 41.
[22] Dugin, *The Great Awakening*, 40.
[23] Dugin, *The Great Awakening*, 43.
[24] Dugin, *The Great Awakening*, 33.

As with other attacks on liberalism through the twentieth century Dugin, has advocated for an anti-modernist conservative revolution, which shows similarities to the fascist writings of the jurist Ivan Ilyin, which, according to Snyder, are another key influence on Putin.[25] Alongside such historical storytelling by disaster nationalists goes control of the media and suppression of alternative stories, which even includes outlawing discussion of the Soviet past: the myth that is instilled in such an environment becomes a kind of "bottomless fear" where the nation is understood as a powerless victim where outside forces constantly threaten its very identity. This leads to a kind of nostalgia where the notion of progress and meaning in history is supplanted by the politics of eternity, that is a form of politics that stands beyond the concrete world of time, and where facts no longer matter. As Snyder puts it, "Russia had ceased to reflect on history,"[26] substituting a myth of a once glorious past: "The twentieth century was well and truly over, its lessons unlearned."[27]

At a theological level, such ideas and their associated "Russian world" understanding of history where Russia becomes a superior actor on the global stage in the resistance to the decadence of Western civilisation, have found a voice in religious circles, as has been charted by the Ukrainian ecclesiologist Cyril Hovorun among many others.[28] For instance, on 23 May 2022, not long after the beginning of the second war in Ukraine, Patriarch Kirill claimed the "Russian world is again becoming a forefront of the Christian civilisation."[29] Shortly beforehand, he had spoken of the war as "metaphysical" in its fight against "propaganda of sin," amongst which he included the so-called "gender ideology" and legalization of same-sex partnerships.[30] Interestingly, it was not simply the Orthodox Church that was involved in support of the war in Ukraine. Sergey

[25] Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 17–35.

[26] Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 5.

[27] Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 6.

[28] Cyril Hovorun, "Russian Church and Ukrainian War," *The Expository Times* 134, no. 1 (2022): 1–10, https://doi.org/10.1177/00145246221119120. See also Elizabeth A. Clark and Dmytro Vovk, eds., *Religion during the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020); Thomas Bremer, Alfons Brüning, and Nadieszada Kizenko, eds., *Orthodoxy in Two Manifestations? The Conflict in Ukraine as Expression of a Fault Line in World Orthodoxy* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2022); see also Hans-Peter Grosshans and Pantelis Kalaitzidis, eds., *Politics, Society and Culture in Orthodox Theology in a Global Age* (Paderborn: Brill Schöningh, 2023); Marietta van der Tol, Sophia Johnson, Petr Kratochvíl, and Zoran Grozdanov, eds., *The Many Faces of Christianism: The "Russian World" in Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2025).

[29] Patriarch Kirill, "Speech of Patriarch Kirill," May 23, 2022, accessed January 22, 2026, Official Moscow Patriarchate website, http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5928249.html.

[30] Maksym Vasin, "Religion as a Key Front of Russian Aggression Against Ukraine," in *War in Ukraine: Theological, Ethical and Historical Reflections*, ed. Christina Dietl,

Ryakhovsky, leader of the Pentecostal Union of Churches, introduced the tradition of singing the Russian national anthem before services, including the words: "Russia is our sacred state, … Glory, the country! We are proud of you!"[31]

It is not difficult to find similar movements and ideas in the United States and in Western Europe. Trump's attacks on the museums of the Smithsonian Institution and the media as well as the harnessing of Christian nationalism by J. D. Vance and others are obvious examples. As Snyder writes, "A new form of politics was emerging in Russia, Europe, and America, a new unfreedom to suit a new time."[32] This understanding is embodied in such ideas as the outlaw migrant, which is particularly prominent in some circles in the United Kingdom and the violent deportation policies of the United States, as well as in more general ideas such as Making America Great Again or (in the United Kingdom) the elusive Brexit Benefits. Sometimes these can extend into conspiracy theories such as Renaud Camus' idea of the great replacement of the indigenous European population by Muslims as reflected in the rhetoric of the so-called "civilisational erasure" of the National Security Strategy.

Usually at the less radical end of the spectrum, academics have ventured into these debates. The Scottish-American historian, Niall Ferguson, for instance, wrote a syndicated newspaper article in 2015 in the wake of the Bataclan nightclub massacre in Paris: Europe, he claimed, "has allowed its defences to crumble. … It has grown decadent in its shopping malls and sports stadiums," letting in "outsiders who have coveted its wealth without renouncing their ancestral faith." He continued:

> As before they have come from all over the imperial periphery … but this time they have come in their millions, not in mere tens of thousands … As Gibbon saw, convinced monotheists pose a grave threat to a secular empire … 21st century Europe has itself to blame for the mess it is now in. Surely nowhere in the world has devoted more resources to the study of history than modern Europe did. When I went up to Oxford more than 30 years ago, it was taken for granted that in the first term I would study Gibbon. It did no good. We learnt a lot of nonsense to the effect that nationalism was a bad thing, nation states worse and empires the worst things of all.[33]

Khrystyna Fostyak, Thomas Schulte-Umberg, Olha Uhryn, and Noreen van Elk (Münster: Aschendorff, 2025), 110–27, 116.

[31] Vasin, "Religion as a Key Front," 117.

[32] Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 6.

[33] Niall Ferguson, "Like the Roman Empire, Europe Has Let Its Defences Crumble," *Sunday Times*, November 15, 2015, accessed January 22 2026, https://www.thetimes.com/comment/register/article/like-the-roman-empire-europe-has-let-its-defences-crumble-klw92p2wqf7.

Quite clearly there is a tension here between versions of history based on a politics of inevitability and the alternative politics of eternity that sees a threat from outsiders and the need to return to a past where boundaries and cultural homogeneity were maintained. The clamour for historical objectivity, which is presumably what Ferguson was being taught in his first term at Oxford, is dismissed with a simple rhetorical flourish: it was simply "a lot of nonsense." It is easy to find theological supporters of such thinking. The ennobled Nigel Biggar, formerly Regius Professor of Moral Theology in Oxford, for instance, has long been involved in questioning critics of Empire.[34] On social media it is not difficult to find theological defences of anti-critical thinking, even among the mainstream, such as Bishop Robert Barron's influential Word on Fire website.

What seems conspicuously lacking in much of the contemporary discourse, however, is what one might refer to as "the politics of responsibility," a politics based on grappling with the facts. There are not simply two versions of politics, the discredited optimism of the politics of inevitability of the end of history and the nostalgic anti-history of the politics of eternity. There is a third way. As Snyder puts it: "If we see history as it is, we see our places in it, what we might change, and how we might do better. We halt our thoughtless journey from inevitability to eternity and exit the road to unfreedom. We begin a politics of responsibility."[35]

1914 and 1918

To illustrate the potential of this third way, as well as the impact it made on theology, let me turn to another twentieth-century *Zeitenwende*, that of the aftermath of the First World War after the armistice of 1918. As Fukuyama suggested, the beginning of the twentieth century was characterised by increasing globalisation and internationalism. Things appeared to be developing smoothly as Western technology and civilisation seemed to be spreading and the world appeared to be shrinking through fast shipping and undersea cables. This was certainly true in the mission field as through the impact of imperial expansion, new territories, particularly in Africa, were opened up for the proclamation of the Gospel. In the light of the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference there was increased co-operation between the historic Protestant churches. The great historical and cultural affinities between Germany, Britain and America meant that there was much common cause on religious, theological and missionary matters. Many Protestant theologians, including the great patristics scholar and public intellectual Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), had huge international reputations.

[34] See Nigel Biggar, *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning* (London: Collins, 2023); Nigel Biggar, *Reparations: The Tyranny of Imaginary Guilt* (London: Forum, 2025).
[35] Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 281.

All this was to change after the outbreak of war. Almost overnight, pre-war internationalism was completely transformed, despite efforts among some theologians to retain links for the sake of Christian missions.[36] As with other aspects of human culture, the First World War was to make a huge impact on Christian theology, which inevitably challenged the various competing perceptions of the politics of inevitability and the doctrine of progress. The sort of cosmopolitan values upheld by many liberals before the First World War gave way to a resurgent nationalism that was often linked with the crusading zeal of the past: in Germany, for instance, Harnack was asked to produce a manifesto in support of German war aims published on 4 October 1914.[37] The so-called "Appeal to the Civilized World"[38] carried the signatures of ninety-three intellectuals, among them seven Catholic and five Protestant theologians from different theological camps.

Given the eruption of wartime nationalism and the collapse of empires, the period following the armistice of 1918 presented one of the most comprehensive changes in European history, with perhaps surprising similarities to Snyder's diagnosis of the early twenty-first century: there were conflicts between the cosmopolitan liberalism that underpinned experiments in democracy and international relations, particularly in the League of Nations and the Weimar Constitution,[39] and conservative retrievals of the past, which looked like politics of eternity, perhaps best exemplified by the Catholic jurist and Nazi ideologue Carl Schmitt. Some sought an escape from history altogether since it seemed that progressivist ideologies of history ("the politics of inevitability") had been responsible for the collapse into war in the first place. Some, including theologians, immersed themselves in the myths of victimhood and scapegoating, with horrific consequences.

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[36] See my *Theology at War and Peace* (London: Routledge, 2017), 47–64.

[37] See J. C. O'Neill, "Adolf von Harnack and the Entry of the German State into War, July–August 1914," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 (2002): 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1017/S003693060200011X.

[38] "An die Kulturwelt," *Berliner Tageblatt*, 4 October 1914. See the critical edition and account of the production of the Manifesto in Jürgen von Ungern-Sternberg and Wolfgang von Ungern-Sternberg, *Der Aufruf "An der Kulturwelt"*: *Das Manifest der 93 und die Anfänge der Kriegspropaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1996); 2nd expanded ed. with a contribution from Trude Maurer (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013). See also Julian Jenkins, "War Theology, 1914 and Germany's *Sonderweg*: Luther's Heirs and Patriotism," *The Journal of Religious History* 15 (1989): 292–310; and, more generally, Kurt Flasch, *Die geistige Mobilmachung: Die deutschen Intellektuellen und der Erste Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Alexander Fest Verlag, 2000).

[39] On the crisis of the Weimar Republic, see Detlev Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik: Krisenjahre der klassischen Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987). On theology in the period, see Klaus Tanner, "Protestant Revolt Against Modernity," in *The Weimar Moment: Liberalism, Political Theology, and Law*, ed. Rudy Koshar (New York: Lexington, 2012), 3–16.

Furthermore, critical study of the past, which was often associated with progressive myths, was regarded as a deception, which required escape into an alternative reality (the "politics of eternity").

Let me illustrate these tensions by drawing on the work of the well-known Protestant theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) who had moved from the Theology Faculty at Heidelberg to the Philosophy Faculty at the University of Berlin in 1915. As the war progressed, Troeltsch turned increasingly towards reflection on the nature of history which led to his magnum opus *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*.[40] After the war he entered liberal politics as a member of the *Deutsche Demokratische Partei*, defending the Weimar Republic and assuming responsibilities in the Prussian Ministry for Science, Art and Education. He died shortly before a planned trip to Britain in 1923. Troeltsch's engagement in politics and his unwavering commitment to the constructive possibilities of history, led him in what he regarded as an "Anglo-Saxon" direction:

> Many of us in Germany regard "compromise" as the lowest and most despicable means to which a thinker can resort. We are asked to recognize a radical disjunction here, and to choose either for or against … But twist and turn the matter as you will, all intransigence breaks down in practice, and can only end in disaster.[41]

For Troeltsch, the best possible solution to the problems of history, which he admitted would fail to satisfy many, was based upon a rough and ready compromise that took investigations of the constraints of history seriously.[42] It was opposed to the solution proposed by other theologians at the time for whom there could be no compromises: "In history itself there are only relative victories; and these relative victories themselves vary greatly in power and depth, according to time and circumstance."[43] Such a defence of political and theological compromise based on the study of history provoked a number of young theologians in the aftermath

[40] Ernst Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1922). Now in Ernst Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme: Erstes Buch: Das logische Problem der Geschichtsphilosophie (1922) = Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (KGA), vol. 16, pts. 1–2 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012).

[41] Ernst Troeltsch, *Christian Thought: Its History and Application*, in *Fünf Vorträge zu Religion und Geschichtsphilosophie für England und Schottland*, ed. Trutz Rendtorff, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (KGA), vol. 17 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006), 202 (164 in the original edition).

[42] Troeltsch, *Christian Thought*, 202–3 (164–65).

[43] Troeltsch, *Christian Thought*, 187 (128–29).

of the First World War to respond in very different ways. To many, Troeltsch's approach to history appeared to be delusional.[44]

Many theologians have seen the First World War as a kind of *Zeitenwende*. As Heinz Zahrnt put it: "historically, the Twentieth Century began in August 1914 with the outbreak of the First World War."[45] Symbolically at least, Karl Barth saw the publication of the Manifesto of the 93 as a "black day" for theology, later claiming that from that time he could no "longer follow either their ethics and dogmatics or their understanding of the Bible and of history. For me," he went on, "nineteenth-century theology no longer held any future."[46] Consequently, where earlier theologians had sought to reconcile theological truths with the march of human history, Barth and his young colleagues sought the very opposite, presenting a direct challenge to Troeltsch.[47] Most importantly, and drawing on the apocalyptic mood of the time, Friedrich Gogarten (1887–1967) gave his 1920 theological manifesto the title *Zwischen den Zeiten*—"between the times," the very title of which is a reflection on the *Zeitenwende*.[48] A new radical journal took the same title, as if somehow history and all that it stood for had come to an end and had to begin again.[49]

[44] On this, see Kurt Nowak, *Geschichte des Christentums in Deutschland* (Munich: Beck, 1995), 212–15; and "Die 'antihistoristische Revolution' Symptome und Folgen der Krise historischer Weltorientierung nach der Ersten Weltkrieg in Deutschland," in *Troeltsch-Studien IV: Umstrittene Moderne: Die Zukunft der Neuzeit im Urteil der Epoche Ernst Troeltschs* (*TS IV*), ed. Horst Renz and Friedrich-Wilhelm Graf (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1987), 133–71.

[45] Heinz Zahrnt, *The Question of God* (London: Collins, 1969), 15.

[46] Karl Barth, "Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century (1956)," in *The Humanity of God* (London: Collins, 1961), 11–33, at 14.

[47] Friedrich Gogarten, "Between the Times" (1920), in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1968), vol. 1, 277–81. See Matthias Kroeger, *Friedrich Gogarten: Leben und Werk in zeitgeschichtlicher Perspektive* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1997), 1:216–21.

[48] On the rise and fall of dialectical theology, see D. Timothy Goering, "System der Käseplatte, Aufstieg und Fall der Dialektischen Theologie," *Zeitschrift für neuere Theologiegeschichte* 24 (2017): 1–50, esp. 11. https://doi.org/10.1515/znth-2017-0001.

[49] F. W. Graf, "'Kierkegaards junge Herren': Troeltschs Kritik der 'geistigen Revolution' im frühen zwanzigsten Jahrhundert," in *Troeltsch-Studien III: Protestantismus und Neuzeit. Troeltsch-Studien*, ed. Horst Renz and F. W. Graf (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1984), 172–92, esp. 174.

Gogarten had studied with Troeltsch in Heidelberg,[50] although he had come to reject what he regarded as his compromises.[51] For Gogarten, the chief question was how Christianity could be affirmed "in the face of the profound crisis provoked by the emergence of modern thought."[52] His perception of crisis had been shaped by a reading of Luther, Kierkegaard and "various signs of the modern spirit."[53] Rather than searching for solutions in history, however, Gogarten held that there was a need to look beyond history, which, after the disastrous war, seemed to be at an end.[54] Everything seemed to be disintegrating and all that was left for the theologian was to stand immediately before God.[55] In October 1920, Gogarten lectured on "The Crisis of Our Culture,"[56] at a conference in Eisenach tackling Oswald Spengler's theme of the decline of the West, one of the most popular of the cultural criticisms of the time and reminiscent in its methods to some of the ideologues of the contemporary politics of eternity.[57] He offered an unambiguous challenge to Troeltsch.[58] Strongly influenced by Kierkegaard's dialectic of Either/Or,[59] he spoke of the convulsions of the contemporary world, emphasising not *history* but "really living in the moment," that is, "referring the contents of the moment—whatever they may be—to the Absolute," or, in Snyder's terms, the politics of eternity.[60] There can be no space at all for compromises. Gogarten went on: "A religion which has to reconcile itself to this world as it is, is itself drawn along into the contingencies from which it should be freeing us, and it will dance the insane dance of world-history and so-called evolution."[61]

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[50] On this dispute see Robert Morgan, "Ernst Troeltsch and Dialectical Theology," in *Ernst Troeltsch and the Future of Theology*, ed. J. P. Clayton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 33–77; H.-G. Drescher, "Entwicklungsdenken und Glaubensentscheidung: Troeltschs Kierkegaardverständnis und die Kontroverse Troeltsch-Gogarten," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, NF 79 (1982): 80–106; On Troeltsch and Kierkegaard, see Mark D. Chapman, "Ernst Troeltsch: Kierkegaard, Compromise, and Dialectical Theology," in *Kierkegaard's Influence on Theology: Tome I: German Protestant Theology*, ed. Jon Stewart (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 377–92.

[51] He made this claim explicitly in later responses to Troeltsch: "Against Romantic Theology," 318; and "Historismus" (1924), in *Beginnings*, 350. See also Graf, "Kierkegaards junge Herren," 187.

[52] Curriculum Vitae (1923) cited by Morgan, "Troeltsch and Dialectical Theology," 44.

[53] Morgan, "Troeltsch and Dialectical Theology," 44; Kroeger, *Friedrich Gogarten*, 230–33.

[54] Gogarten, "Between the Times," 278.

[55] Gogarten, "Between the Times," 282.

[56] Gogarten, *Beginnings*, 283–300.

[57] Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1932).

[58] On the circumstances of the lecture, see Kroeger, *Friedrich Gogarten*, 290–314.

[59] Gogarten, "Crisis of Culture," 292.

[60] Gogarten, "Crisis of Culture," 284.

[61] Gogarten, "Crisis of Culture," 291.

In short, he concludes: "God's holiness annihilates both world and time."[62] In the same way Jesus Christ "is identical with the act of God and with the annihilation of the world."[63] The human lot is consequently to "remain exactly where we find ourselves—in the annihilating, creating act of God."[64]

Troeltsch responded to Gogarten with his own strongly worded polemic, "An Apple from the Tree of Kierkegaard,"[65] where he likens Gogarten's lecture to the apples of discord offered by the Goddess Eris. According to Troeltsch, like Kierkegaard, "Gogarten speaks of the 'Christianity' which corresponds to no church or confession or historical form, but is wholly personal and private, deriving from a very sharp radicalism against the world, the nation, the State, culture, and church … While Kierkegaard mainly attacks the churches, Gogarten attacks culture, its social demands and scientific concepts, all of which are historical or intellectualistic."[66] For Troeltsch, the main problem with Gogarten was how this radical judgement on the world was related to the realm of history: what he failed to register was that churches had always had to make compromises with culture. Kierkegaard belonged in the "realm of sectarian religion and correspondingly fought for a purely individual and abstract, a purely personal and absolutely radical, Christianity."[67] Similarly, Troeltsch claimed, "Logical and historical reasons … are of no use to the 'youth' of today. Anti-historicism, irrationalism, intuitionism … have already become comfortable and pleasant dogmas for many of the young."[68] Gogarten here is understood as an example of the wider youth movement with Kierkegaard as its mentor, which has revolted against history and the compromises of the past. Troeltsch, however, took a quite different path and could not regard God's creative activity as completely beyond the historical world; instead "they are themselves the life of the world … for the whole world is God's."[69]

In a further response with the title "Against Romantic Theology,"[70] Gogarten attacked Troeltsch's reliance on history: "The debate is above all one about this general historicising of thinking itself. Again, this is not a theory of Troeltsch but a fact which he pointed out in all its ramifications and consequences."[71] Given his distaste for history, it comes as little surprise that Gogarten was later to move

[62] Gogarten, "Crisis of Culture," 295.
[63] Gogarten, "Crisis of Culture," 297.
[64] Gogarten, "Crisis of Culture," 297, 299.
[65] Gogarten, *Beginnings*, 311–16.
[66] Ernst Troeltsch, "An Apple from the Tree of Kierkegaard," in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, ed. James Richmond, vol. 1 (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1968), 312.
[67] Troeltsch, "An Apple from the Tree of Kierkegaard," 313–14.
[68] Troeltsch, "An Apple from the Tree of Kierkegaard," 314.
[69] Troeltsch, "An Apple from the Tree of Kierkegaard," 315.
[70] English translation in Gogarten, *Beginnings*, 317–27. See Kroeger, *Friedrich Gogarten*, 296–97.
[71] "Historismus," in Gogarten, *Beginnings*, 350.

in a far more totalitarian direction.[72] But what is important for this discussion is that the debates between Gogarten and Troeltsch reveal a fundamental difference in the role of historical truth in theology and wider learning. For Gogarten, all historical compromises seemed to be an irresponsible collusion with a discredited culture. Troeltsch's post-1918 democratic solutions to the realisation of Christian ethics seemed quite out of keeping with the new thrust of theology. In contrast—and here I return to my earlier themes—I would suggest that a crisis situation, a *Zeitenwende*, does not necessarily require a crisis theology, even if the alternatives might seem far less daring. The study of history with the resultant politics of responsibility is, after all, a painstaking and at times somewhat arduous task that can involve hours in the library. Recourse to the politics and theology of eternity might be a somewhat premature and reality-denying move.

1945: The Year Zero and Rehistoricizing Theology

Finally, I turn to one last *Zeitenwende*: to 1945, when, at least in postwar Germany, everything had to begin again. It was often described as the year or hour zero (*Jahre* or *Stunde Null*). In 1948 the Italian film director Roberto Rossellini released a film entitled *Deutschland im Jahre Null* (*Germania anno zero*; *Germany, Year Zero*). It was the third in his trilogy of films which took as their theme the immediate postwar years. After two films set in Rome, the third moved to a devastated Berlin occupied by allied forces. *Deutschland im Jahre Null* is a bleak neo-realist film that centres on a family forced into multiple occupancy in a bombed-out apartment where three siblings look after their sick father, fending for themselves in appalling conditions with shortages, the black market, and sexual exploitation. It ends in tragedy as the 12-year-old Edmund Köhler plunges to his death after poisoning his father on the instructions of a Nazi-sympathizing teacher.

The film is important in helping to illuminate the importance of historical truth-telling. While melodramatic, it has a very powerful sense of sincerity, making every effort at historical accuracy about the moral ambiguity of the times. The actors were all non-professionals: Edmund was played by a circus acrobat who looked like Rossellini's own son, Romano, who had died of appendicitis in 1946 and to whom the film is dedicated. François Truffaut said that Rossellini was almost the only filmmaker "who has filmed adolescence without sentimentality."[73] He suggested: "The truth is that Rossellini is not an 'activist' nor is he an ambitious man. He is an inquirer, a man who asks questions, who is much more interested in other people than he is in himself." Crucially, he spent his time "gathering social and historical facts."[74] In the opening frames of the German

[72] Morgan, "Ernst Troeltsch and Dialectical Theology," 47.

[73] François Truffaut, "Roberto Rossellini Prefers Real Life," in *The Films in My Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975), 273–77, at 276.

[74] Truffaut, *The Films in My Life*, 276.

version of the film, over shots of devastated Berlin, a speaker narrates the context: "This film was shot in Berlin in the summer of 1947. It is intended to be simply an objective, true-to-life picture of this enormous, half-destroyed city, in which three and a half million people are carrying on a frightful, desperate existence almost without realizing it. … This film is not an act of accusation against the German people, nor yet a defense of them. It is simply a presentation of the facts."[75]

In the published edition of the screenplays to the trilogy, Rossellini commented that he simply wanted to "understand events that had involved me personally, and that had overwhelmed me. They were explorations of historical facts, but more particularly of attitudes, of types of behavior determined by a particular historical climate or situation."[76] He considered the films a kind of fresh page on a balance sheet, focusing on the people who had to "deal with life on completely new terms."[77] At the same time, those new terms were always connected to the past: the characters in *Germany, Year Zero* are not suddenly purged of their Nazi past: "I realized that things were infinitely more complex and that to 'know' meant to know infinitely more than" what was contained simply in books.[78]

The title of the film is ambiguous: the devastation of Berlin indicates the collapse of the past and in some sense, history begins again at the zero hour. It is a new page; and yet the characters continue to express something of the past. The Nazi regime may have come to an end, but ideas continue: the boy is tempted by his teacher who has ulterior motives and joins a small group of cigarette traders who are simply trying to eke out a life. Neither wholly good nor wholly bad, the characters are victims of events and cannot resist the corruption of the time. In his efforts to tell history as it is, Rossellini is at the same time refusing to jettison a past, however complex and contested. Year zero may mark a new beginning, but it is not unrelated to the past: it is not a film of the victors or the vanquished but principally of the ambiguities of human life which continue whatever happens. While there is no overt religion in the film, the 1948 review in *Variety* notes that the American screening began with a very different foreword from that in the published screenplay and on the Italian trailer which gives it more of a straight political message: "Germany has backtracked 1948 years. It's now at naught as if Christ weren't born, since they wanted to kill Him again. Therefore, don't seek traces of our civilization in this film. They've disappeared."[79] Whether the death of the boy is a religious metaphor is unclear—he has after all been driven to death by those around him whom he trusts—but what is crucial is that the moral ambiguities of history carry on regardless, even in what seems to be the year zero.

[75] Roberto Rossellini, "The Intelligence of the Present Roberto Rossellini," in *The War Trilogy*, ed. Stefano Roncoroni (New York: Grossman, 1973), 353–54.
[76] Rossellini, "The Intelligence of the Present Roberto Rossellini," xvi.
[77] Rossellini, "The Intelligence of the Present Roberto Rossellini," xvii.
[78] Rossellini, "The Intelligence of the Present Roberto Rossellini," xviii.
[79] "Germany Year Zero," *Variety*, June 9, 1948, 12.

History cannot be replaced with either the politics of inevitability or the politics of eternity. Instead, Rossellini's film functions as an essay on historical facticity against the distortions of the two trajectories of pseudo-history.

Of course, at the same time 1945 also marked the beginning of the history that triumphed (or ended) in 1989. Indeed, Fukuyama's thesis is incomprehensible without looking back at the forty-five years following the end of the Second World War. Even though the whole of Europe was divided into competing camps, the process of economic development of the West depended on the unprecedented economic power of the United States and the imposition of liberal democracy and the dominance of its new institutions.[80] This frequently led to the history-denying politics of inevitability, of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, and undoubtedly the notion of zero hour could be a convenient cypher in forgetting the horrors of the past: as one commentator put it, "instead of spurring a new revanchism, the collective working-through of the meaning of 1945 became the basis for an astounding political, economic, and cultural revival."[81] But, at least compared with 1918, Germany also increasingly adopted a critical view of its own past: once theology had been re-established through the process of denazification and re-education, theologians from both the major traditions were often the foremost defenders of critical historical reinterpretation. Something like Rossellini's simple narration of the facts became central in the approach to the past. For instance, the group of bright young scholars who produced the collected volume *Revelation as History* which included such figures as the well-known Protestant theologians Wolfhart Pannenberg and Trutz Rendtorff, questioned the sort of antihistorical theology of the dialectical theologians including Barth and Gogarten. As Pannenberg put it: "History is the most comprehensive horizon of Christian theology. All theological questions and answers have meaning only within the framework of the history which God has with mankind, and through mankind with the whole creation."[82]

Conclusion

These reflections on politics, history, and theology that were provoked by the perceived *Zeitenwende* of 2022 with the Russian invasion of Ukraine reveal something of the complexities of the contemporary political situation and its ambiguous relationship with history. It seems to me that much of what passes for

[80] Geoffrey J. Giles, ed., *Stunde Null: The End and the Beginning Fifty Years Ago* (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute, 1997).

[81] Konrad H. Jarausch, "1945 and the Continuities of German History: Reflections on Memory, Historiography, and Politics," in *Stunde Null: The End and the Beginning Fifty Years Ago*, ed. Geoffrey J. Giles (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute, 1997), 9–18.

[82] Wolfhart Pannenberg, ed., *Offenbarung als Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Revelation as History* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1969), 15.

contemporary political discourse is of a character that has deliberately distanced itself from the critical study of history: as part of the wider culture, many theologians and church leaders have obviously been caught up in a politics of eternity, sometimes parroting its doom-laden discourse. Others have been content to maintain a politics of inevitability in a situation where optimistic liberal assumptions have lost much of their popular appeal and look increasingly implausible. It seems to me, however, that a more complex way of addressing the problems of the present relies on radical questioning and responsible weighing of historical evidence before attempting political solutions. Another example from the past might be helpful: in 1918, Harnack had written that political action, what he called true pacifism, rested in the ability to see a way out of the chaos of the situation, not by ignoring or escaping it through a reliance on eternity, but by fully accepting its historical constraints.[83] "We have the republic," he wrote, "we must do everything to ensure that it is established on an objective foundation."[84]

Historical turning-points, such as those I have discussed in this lecture, challenge many of the assumptions of the past, and yet, as Rossellini showed, they never amount to a year zero or an absolute beginning. History never stops but always needs re-appraising and further critical investigation. After the First and Second World Wars, the certainties of history, and especially of the politics of inevitability, had been fundamentally challenged: in response, political solutions could all too easily lead to an ethics of escape or a flight into something quite anti-historical.

So where does this leave us as Christians and as theologians operating in twenty-first-century Europe? I would suggest that for a religion of the incarnation, history can never be at an end, even when something of that end might have already been revealed. Theologians, at least those who take history seriously, might sometimes have a responsibility to teach politicians that politics cannot deal either in the optimistic certainties of inevitability or in the pessimistic politics of eternity. Truthful politicians—if such a breed exists—cannot live without compromises forced on them by the responsibilities to boring, tedious and factual history. This was the point brilliantly made by Mark Carney in his speech on January 20, 2026, at Davos:

> We knew the story of the international rules-based order was partially false, that the strongest would exempt themselves when convenient, that trade rules were enforced asymmetrically, and we knew that international law applied with varied rigor, depending on the identity of the accused or the victim. This fiction was useful,

[83] Adolf von Harnack, *Erforschtes und Erlebtes*, NF, vol. 4 (Gießen: A. Töpelmann, 1924), 314. On Harnack and politics, see Christian Nottmeier, *Adolf von Harnack und die deutsche Politik, 1890–1930. Eine biographische Studie zum Verhältnis von Protestantismus, Wissenschaft und Politik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

[84] Harnack, *Erforschtes und Erlebtes*, 324.

> and American hegemony in particular helped provide public goods, open sea lanes, a stable financial system, collective security, and support for frameworks for resolving disputes … We participated in the rituals, and we largely avoided calling out the gaps between rhetoric and reality. This bargain no longer works. Let me be direct. We are in the midst of a rupture, not a transition.[85]

Indeed, whether we like it or not, as we reach another rupture, a *Zeitenwende*, we have to "dance the insane dance of world history." Or, in Carney's words, "we have a recognition of what's happening and determination to act accordingly. We understand that this rupture calls for more than adaptation. It calls for honesty about the world as it is." Perhaps my lesson is simply this: Christians have to learn to be better dancers lest they mistake eternity and inevitability for the responsibilities to a history in which the Word was made flesh in a time when Emperors ruled the world.

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[85] Mark Carney, "Speech to the World Economic Forum," January 20, 2026, transcript published in "Read the Full Transcript of Carney's Speech to World Economic Forum," *Global News*, accessed January 22, 2026, https://global-news.ca/news/11620877/carney-davos-wef-speech-transcript/.

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READ THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

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Abstract

This chapter argues that the Church's ability to read the "signs of the times" requires a renewed theological methodology that integrates pneumatology, ecclesiology, and public theology. The Church is understood as a living reality continually shaped by the ongoing mystery of Christ's Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection through the work of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, crises should not be interpreted merely as decline but as *kairoi*—moments of discernment and transformation calling the Church to deeper conversion (*metanoia*) and authentic reform. The chapter identifies the continuing exculturation of Christianity in the contemporary West as one of the decisive signs of our age. It argues that the Church's challenge is not simply declining institutional membership but the loss of cultural intelligibility and credibility. Responding to this situation requires moving beyond defensive traditionalism and outdated conflicts between "progressive" and "anti-modernist" approaches toward a post-critical theology capable of engaging a pluralistic, postmodern world. Drawing on phenomenological and hermeneutical perspectives, the chapter proposes understanding faith primarily as a lived relationship with God rather than as assent to propositions or institutional belonging. It presents Pope Francis's vision of synodality as a profound transformation of the Church's *modus essendi*, grounded in listening, discernment, contemplative spirituality, and theological renewal. Finally, it argues that theology must become genuinely public, interpreting cultural and social developments in the light of the Gospel while remaining humble before the inexhaustible mystery of God and open to dialogue with the wider human community.

Keywords: Signs of the times; synodality; ecclesiology; pneumatology; exculturation; Church reform; spiritual discernment.

Dear colleagues, *cives academici*,
I would like to discuss with you, the community of theologians, the role of theology in synodal reform, particularly its prophetic function. "Reading the signs of the times"—the theological interpretation of cultural and societal changes—requires a new theological approach: an interconnectedness between pneumatology, ecclesiology, and public theology.

Christianity understands God as the source and goal of history. History is the place of *theophany*. God enters into history as Spirit (*Spiritus Creator et Vivificator*) and Word (*Logos*), many times and in various ways. However, the centre of history and the key to understanding its meaning is the "event of Christ": the *ongoing* story of Jesus of Nazareth. In him, in the mystery of the Incarnation, the Word enters and transforms the history of the human family.

Just as human existence cannot be separated from the world and history, the existence of a Christian cannot be separated from the Church community, which "re-presents" Christ, being the space of his permanent presence and activity in the world's history. The Church is shaped and constantly transformed by the ongoing mystery of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection—*incarnatio continua, passio continua,* and *resurrectio continua*. The risen Christ is permanently present and active through his Spirit in the Church's faith and in its proclamation (*kerygma*), celebration (*leitourgia*), and witness (*martyria*).

The Spirit's mission is to constantly revitalize and deepen the life of the Church in all its dimensions. Christ's presence through his Spirit in the history of the Church is dynamic and growing. However, it is not constant or unidirectional progress. This presence cannot be equated with the growth of the Church's membership, its geographical spread, or its visible influence on society. Even crises and "dark nights" have their significant place in the lives of individual believers and in the history of the Church. These crises can be a form of participation in Christ's suffering (*passio continua*), in the mystery of the cross. If the Church understands them in this way and embraces and integrates them, they can become opportunities for her maturation and the maturation of her faith.

The celebration of Easter reminds us every year that we must go through Good Friday and accept the cross in order to experience catharsis and participate in the resurrection. Without death, there is no resurrection. Without catharsis, crisis phenomena can cause trauma and pathological reactions, such as an escape into the past and a fear of the present and future. *Pronoia* (foresight) is replaced by *paranoia* (suspicion and panic).

Resurrection, the central mystery of Christianity, is not a return or a step back but a total transformation. Faith in Resurrection is the acceptance of a radically new, unknown, rationally incomprehensible, and inexplicable reality that will only be fully revealed in the eschatological consummation of history. The Easter liturgy and events in the history of the Church are an "anamnesis" of the Easter drama.

I repeat: the history of the Church and the growth of the presence of the Risen One within it are not steady "progress," a direct path from lower to higher, from worse to better. Rather, it is a drama in which God's actions (grace) encounter "sins"—dead ends, obstacles, and resistance in the lives of individuals and ecclesiastical structures. These sins include closedness to oneself, individual and collective narcissism, and loss of open communication with others, one's environment, and thus, God. Systems unable to communicate creatively with their social and natural environments and respond appropriately to external stimuli marginalize themselves and degenerate. However, as Scripture tells us in Romans 5:20, "where sin has multiplied, grace abounds even more." Manifestations of God's actions often give rise to renewal initiatives.

Reform as an Opportunity to Discover One's Own Identity More Deeply

The living Church is *ecclesia semper reformanda*, undergoing a constant process of transformation (*metanoia*). Like all living organisms, the Church is constantly changing. However, in certain situations, more profound systemic change is necessary. The time for deep reform comes when the Church is experiencing a profound internal crisis, facing intense external or internal pressure, or undergoing a paradigm shift in society and culture—a transition from one phase of history to another.

If any aspect of the external form—and this includes everything visible in the Church—stifles, distorts, or weakens the development, credibility, or intelligibility of the Church's content, identity, or inner life, then re-formation must take place. The form must serve the content. Fidelity to the content is demonstrated through the courage and responsibility required to heal or replace structures (in areas such as institutions, theology, and liturgy) that have ceased to fulfil their mission.

However, distinguishing between form and content in the life of the Church is difficult. Therefore, an indispensable part of reform and a sign of its authenticity is theology's effort to achieve a deeper understanding of, and better expression for, the Church's identity. Reform must always include renewed questioning of the Church's *identity.*

The Church's essence and identity is the work of the Holy Spirit—the wind that, as Jesus says, we do not know where it comes from or where it goes (John 3:8). The Church's identity cannot be fully expressed or identified with any set of statements, rituals or institutional structures. Her identity (Christ's dynamic presence) develops and matures, and it is during authentic reform that it becomes more apparent. When considering past and planned major reform initiatives, it is necessary to examine how they have or could enrich the Church's self-reflection and deepen understanding of its nature and mission.

Inculturation and Exculturation

The essence of the Church and its mission are one and the same: *Church is mission.*[1] Mission is not the same as proselytism, recruiting new members. The goal of the Christian mission is evangelization. The essence of evangelization is inculturation—the incorporation of the Christian message into the culture, way of thinking, and way of life. Without inculturation, evangelization is mere superficial indoctrination.

In the Western world during the modern era, however, we observe the opposite process—the *exculturation* of Christianity. Exculturation occurs when the Church loses its ability to influence a society's cultural and moral climate through its means of expression. When the Church becomes too insular, its influence on societal communication channels weakens.

The Church's self-excommunication from the post-Enlightenment culture of modern Western society was a long-term process that culminated during the First Vatican Council and the subsequent "hunt for modernists." The political, economic, social, cultural, and scientific revolutions of the 19th and 20th centuries provoked fear and defensive reactions in the Church. Rather than engaging in careful spiritual discernment, the Church's magisterium at the end of the 19th century amalgamated various disparate thought currents and created an "enemy image": the spectre of modernism. "Lists of modern errors" (the most famous of which was Pius IX's Syllabus of 1864) revealed more about the mentality of their authors than about modern culture.

"Anti-modernism," like Protestant fundamentalism of the same period, invoked tradition. In reality, however, it was one of the typical faces of the modern age and of modern Christianity. Both Catholic anti-modernism and Protestant fundamentalism were modern attempts to halt the flow of tradition, extracting a certain form of the Church and theology from their contexts and freezing them in place. Paradoxically, theological systems such as neo-scholastic apologetics, in their struggle against modern ideologies (positivism, scientism, dogmatic Marxism), began to resemble these ideologies in their closed-mindedness. Their greatest weakness was not their rejection of theological liberalism, which, in many respects, deserved theological criticism, but rather their inability to offer a creative alternative.

During modernity, in its struggle with Protestantism and secular culture, the Church began to see itself and behave as a closed fortress, constantly defending itself on all sides. Nostalgia for medieval *Christianitas*, as depicted by 19th-century Romantics, gave rise to an uncreative "retro style" in various fields—Neo-Gothic, Neo-Baroque, and Neo-Renaissance in art, Neo-Scholasticism and Neo-

[1] Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission: Final Document (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), no. 32, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf.

Thomism in theology and philosophy. It is no coincidence that a certain type of closed "Catholicism" sympathized with authoritarian regimes such as fascism. (The equivalent of "Catholic fascism" in France, Spain, Portugal, Croatia, Slovakia, etc., combining Christianity with nationalism, was the "*Deutsche Christen*" movement in Protestantism.)

It is disturbing that this type of "Christian fascism" is rearing its head again today, for example among traditionalist Catholics and evangelical fundamentalists in the American MAGA movement. We see a similar connection between Christianity and nationalism in the ideology of the Orthodox Moscow Patriarchate, which serves Putin's imperial plans. In 2005, the chief ideologist of Russian Orthodoxy, Archbishop Hilarion, called in his speech at the international conference in Gniezno for an alliance between Russian Orthodoxy, the Catholic Church, and radical Islamists in the fight against the "corrupt West" and liberal Christianity, especially Protestantism.

Vatican II and Its Reading of the Signs of the Times

An important attempt to break away from closed "Catholicism" and move toward "catholicity"—the universality and ecumenicity of Christianity that was the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). The Council represented the Church's offer of a dialogical and supportive relationship with "the people of our time," embracing their joys, hopes, sufferings, and anxieties.[2]

The Council offered two means of healing. First, it promoted the idea that the Church is a "*communio viatorum*," or a community of pilgrims. This means that no institutional form or state of theological knowledge can be considered perfect, final, or complete. Considering it as such would be to succumb to the heresy of triumphalism and its accompanying phenomena: clericalism, fundamentalism, and the ideologization of religion. All historical forms of the Church must maintain the dynamism of the journey toward the eschatological goal.

Second, Vatican II called for "reading the signs of the times." At the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church declared Scripture and Tradition to be two equally valuable and venerable sources of God's revelation. The emphasis on tradition served as a safeguard against biblical fundamentalism. Scripture can be understood as part of, and a fruit of, Tradition. The Second Vatican Council offered a broader, deeper, and more dynamic understanding of Tradition.

Tradition is not a buried treasure. Rather, it is a living river of recontextualization and reinterpretation. When interpreting the "treasure of faith," it is necessary to consider two contexts: the time period in which a text was written (whether biblical or a solemn declaration of the Church's teaching authority) and the time period in which it is read today. The hermeneutic circle between the text and the

[2] See Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), no. 1, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

reader includes the worlds of the text's authors and its contemporary readers. Reflecting on the treasure of Tradition helps us better understand the problems of our time. Likewise, our contemporary experiences help us more deeply understand the message entrusted to us: the treasure of faith. Thus, the treasure of Tradition is constantly enriched by the new fruits of the process of cognition.

God, who speaks through Scripture and Tradition, is also the Lord of history, which provides the ever-changing context for our reading and understanding. We believe the same Spirit who inspired these texts and speaks to us through them also speaks to us through contemporary events in culture and society. The Second Vatican Council refers to events in society and culture as "signs of the times," that is, God's messages to us. To recognize God's message in these phenomena, we need the art of "spiritual discernment."

In my texts, I emphasize the need to distinguish between the "signs of the times," which are God's speech, and the "spirit of the times," or Zeitgeist, which is the "speech of this world." The Zeitgeist includes superficial fashion trends, public opinion manipulated by advertising and populists, and contagious ideologies. We can distinguish the "spirit of the times" from the "signs of the times" by observing their consequences, their fruits. St Ignatius of Loyola presented "rules for discerning spirits" in individuals' lives. Today, we need a culture of spiritual discernment to diagnose the state of our world.

Pope Francis called on the Church to become a "field hospital."[3] Perhaps it should be a hospital focused on diagnosis, prevention, and long-term therapy of the moral climate of our societies.

Synodal Renewal—a Continuation of the Council?

The constitution *Gaudium et spes* offered a list of "signs of the times." In its first sentence, this constitution expressed the intention of the conciliar renewal: to deepen the Church's solidarity with "contemporary humanity." However, it must be said that this offer on the part of "contemporary people," that is, the children of the late modern civilization of the 1960s, did not meet with the expected willingness to reciprocate. The process of exculturation did not stop—on the contrary, it intensified after the "cultural revolution" of the late 1960s.

Did the Church's attempt to reconcile with modern culture and integrate its positive elements come too late—at a time when the modern era was already coming to an end? Perhaps the Church did not sufficiently realize that "modern man" is no longer the *external* addressee of the Church's message, but has long since been living within the Church, yet feels less and less at home there.

Was the Church, with the advent of the "postmodern era" of radical plurality—including a new revival of religiosity—shortly after the Council, similarly taken

[3] Francis, "Interview with Pope Francis by Fr Antonio Spadaro, SJ," *La Civiltà Cattolica* (September 19, 2013), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html.

aback as it had been by the advent of secular modernity? Did Vatican II remain an "unfinished revolution," with many of its declarations remaining only on paper rather than being put in the practice of the Church?

I am convinced that if the Church today wants to understand the "signs of the times," it cannot consider the Second Vatican Council, its reforms, and its theology to be the last word. Our civilization is currently undergoing an even more profound paradigm shift than the cultural revolution of the 1960s, and these changes represent a great challenge for the Church and theology. The Council was a necessary step in the right direction, but we must go further.

In the first quarter of the 21st century, the credibility of the Church was shaken by a tsunami of revelations about cases of abuse of authority by clergy. Pope Francis did not view these scandals as the failure of individuals but as a systemic crisis. He realized that the Church needs a profound reform—a transition from the existing system of power communication (clericalism) to a model of the Church as a shared journey (*syn hodos*) of mutual listening, joint search for solutions, and shared decision-making.

Sixty years after the Second Vatican Council*,* Pope Francis has launched *a process of synodal renewal of the Church.* It is intended to be a profound transformation of the entire Church system, with the main emphasis on changing the Church's mentality and communication. He has described this ambitious project as the main task of the Church for the entire third millennium.[4] In his words, this is a process of change not only at the level of the Church's activities (*modus operandi*), but also a transformation *of the modus essendi*; it is a new way of being Christian and of being Church in the conditions of the coming era.

In the modern era, Christianity (or rather its ecclesial form) has lost its role as religion in the sense of the verb *re-ligare*, to reconnect. It has ceased to be the integrating element of the whole of society, the "lingua franca" of Western civilization, a system of shared values that is understandable to all.

In our postmodern age, theology can assume a distinct and challenging role within the synodal reform of the Church: to prepare the Christian community for the cultural role of religion in another sense, in the sense of the verb *re-legere* (to re-read or read anew). The Christian community can be a school of the attentive approach to reality, a school of a new hermeneutic, a new, deeper interpretation of God's speech, of God's self-sharing. In this role, we cannot be replaced by digital technology; this is the mission of creative people who are unique images of the Creator.

[4] "It is precisely this path of synodality that God expects from the Church of the third millennium." Francis, Address on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, October (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

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PROVINCIALIZING EUROPEAN THEOLOGY? THE TASKS OF THEOLOGY IN EUROPE TODAY

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Abstract

Until the 20th century, Western theology dominated the Roman Catholic Church worldwide. Meanwhile, culturally shaped theologies emerged all over the world. The diversity of these theologies not only calls into question the unity of the Catholic Church, but also the authenticity and continuity of the Christian faith. This chapter therefore addresses the challenge of translating the Christian faith into non-European languages and cultures, while acknowledging that the traditional approach to translation is closely linked to ecclesial identity. Against this backdrop, the chapter outlines some present-day conflicts within the global Church that are clearly influenced by culture. These conflicts highlight the need for mutual understanding and acceptance of cultural diversity. Finally, the chapter considers the future role of European theology in fostering respect for cultural differences while maintaining continuity with the Church's doctrinal tradition.

Keywords: European theology; postcolonial theology; intercultural theology; inculturation; ecclesial identity; cultural pluralism.

Since Vatican II, the Catholic Church has expanded significantly beyond the European borders and the northern hemisphere. In contrast, debates during the Council were still dominated by Western theology. Although some of the Council Fathers represented dioceses in the Global South, many of them were missionary bishops sent from Europe. At the beginning of the Council, for example, the African Church counted 256 bishops, among whom only 73 had been born on the African continent.[1] The majority of these bishops had received theological training in Europe and were deeply influenced by Western culture. They now faced the task of introducing Western Latin Christianity to the Christians in their re-

[1] Alfred Guy Bwidi Kitambala, *Les Evêques d'Afrique et le concile Vatican II: Participation, contribution et application du Synode des Evêques de 1994* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010).

spective dioceses. Only a few of the indigenous bishops, such as Archbishop Joseph Albert Malula from the Congo, had the expertise and courage to voice the experiences of non-European Christians in the Council's Commissions and at the General Assembly.

From a Eurocentric perspective, theology in non-European cultures frequently appears as deeply influenced by cultural and religious contexts that are perceived as alien to Western traditions and customs. Many of these contexts are still unknown to theologians in the Western world.[2] Nevertheless, when postgraduate students come to Europe to pursue higher theological studies, the ongoing influence of European theology and philosophy becomes apparent in the topics they choose to research and the methodologies they pursue. In turn, an exchange of ideas and concepts is possible, which may provide their European supervisors with valuable insight into pastoral life and theological reflections from the Global South with which they were previously unfamiliar.

Does this exchange of ideas and concepts reduce the importance of European theology, simply ranking it alongside other forms of theology? Does it reflect a kind of "provincializing European theology"? The question obviously alludes to the title of the well-known book of the Indo-American historian Dipesh Chakrabarty *Provincializing Europe*, published in 2000.[3] Against the background of its imperialistic past, Chakrabarty outlines the consequences and repercussions of the ongoing global cultural pluralisation for Europe. He argues that the loss of universally binding convictions and ethical norms, due to the plurality of cultures, marks the beginning of a new stage in human history: the "postcolonial age." This historical development affects all realms of human practice, reasoning, and thought. Theology is not excluded from this development.

In recent years, theology has begun to address the challenges posed by postcolonialism. A significant number of scholarly publications have been released in this field.[4] The different theological approaches to the challenge of postcolo-

[2] For the terms "European" and "Western," see Philippe Nemo, *What Is the West?* (Detroit, MI: Xanedu, 2005).

[3] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[4] The second issue of the Journal Concilium (2013) was devoted to "Postcolonial Theology." For further reading, see Volker Küster, "From Contextualization to Glocalization: Intercultural Theology and Postcolonial Critique," *Exchange* 45, no. 3 (2016): 203–26, https://doi.org/10.1163/1572543X-12341382; Britta Konz, Bernhard Ortmann, and Christian Wetz, *Postkolonialismus, Theologie und die Konstruktion des Anderen / Postcolonialism, Theology and the Construction of the Other. Erkundungen in einem Grenzgebiet / Exploring Borderlands* (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Grace Ji-Sun Kim, "Postcolonial Theology and Intersectionality," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 55, no. 4 (2020): 595–608. The view from the Global South to the Western World is represented by: Renie S. Choy, *Ancestral Feeling: Postcolonial Thoughts on Western Christian Heritage* (London: SCM Press, 2021).

nialism and postcolonial theory will not be discussed here. Instead, some hermeneutical topics will be presented which must be considered by theologians as theological reasoning and reflection become more diverse on a global scale.[5]

With this objective in mind, the challenge of translating the Christian faith into non-European languages and cultures will be addressed. Secondly, the traditional approach to translating the faith, which is closely linked to the concept of ecclesial identity, will be outlined. Thirdly, some present-day conflicts within the global Church that are shaped by culture will highlight the need for mutual exchange and the acceptance of plurality. Finally, the discussion will turn to the future role of European theology in contributing to respect for cultural differences while preserving continuity with the doctrinal tradition of the Church.

The Challenge of Translating the Gospel

Today in Europe, the majority of Catholic theologians acknowledge the cultural conditioning of ecclesial practice and theological reasoning. Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of the Scriptures of the Holy Bible, their authors are firmly embedded within the Semitic cultures of the Ancient Orient. By contrast, the early writings of the Fathers of the Church are deeply influenced by Greek culture and philosophy. The differences between the language of the Bible and that of Hellenistic philosophy are apparent and well recognised in theological research.[6] Similarly, the differences in the way theology was practised in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages have been thoroughly analysed.[7] Further examples of the different ways of doing theology within different cultures could easily be added.

Reality is always experienced by human beings as mediated by language. This does not negate the fact that humans have immediate bodily sensations such as pain, joy, sadness and hunger.[8] When subjective experiences enter human consciousness, people tend to conceptualise them using language. They express their experiences through propositional attitudes. Propositions refer to beliefs about experiences rather than the experiences themselves.

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[5] Claude Geffré, "La Théologie européenne à la fin de l'europeocentrisme," *Bulletin* 2, no. 1 (1991): 45–64.

[6] See Jean Daniélou, *Message Evangelique et Culture Hellenistique aux IIe et IIIe Siècles* (Paris: Desclée, 1961); Luther H. Martin, "The Hellenisation of Judaeo-Christian faith or the Christianisation of Hellenic thought?" *Religion & Theology* 12, no. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2005): 1–19.

[7] Peter Hünermann, *Dogmatische Prinzipienlehre. Glaube—Überlieferung—Theologie als Sprach- und Wahrheitsgeschehen* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2003): 99–116, 130–33; Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology. An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 16–84.

[8] See Howard Robinson, "Qualia, Qualities, and Our Conception of the Physical World" *After Physicalism*, ed. Benedikt Paul Göcke (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012): 231–63.

This fundamental insight has an immediate impact on Christian theology. At the beginning of the Christian Church, the core message was that Christ had risen from the dead. The resurrection was an event that went beyond the human ability to comprehend reality. The term "resurrection" itself is a metaphor for an experience beyond human comprehension. The same is true of Christ's "appearances" to his disciples. Both terms refer to experiences that transcend human language. Nevertheless, these experiences are real, not imagined. To some extent, one can compare the disciples' experience of Christ's resurrection to the human experience of bodily sensations, as it transcends rational comprehension. Experience comes first; conceptualisation always follows. Nevertheless, conceptualisation is necessary in order to communicate the original sensation of an event which, by its very nature, transcends human comprehension.

In Christian theology, there is a specific term for the conceptualisation of the transcendent in language when it comes to communication: "kerygma." The term refers to the "proclamation," that is, the verbalisation of the fundamental experience of Christ's resurrection, as evidenced by his subsequent "appearances." Jesus' disciples interpreted these experiences in the light of Jesus' words and deeds in Galilee and Jerusalem and the history of God's revelation to Israel as reported in the Hebrew Bible. In this way, the disciples, apostles and authors of the Gospels laid the foundations for what would later be known as apostolic succession, which is the transmission of witnessing an original experience to subsequent generations of faithful Christians.

The initial "kerygma" of Christ's life on earth and his resurrection was disseminated by his disciples and apostles through their preaching throughout the Roman Empire. Their preaching was a form of translation, translating the immediate experience of Christ's person into the language of Christian witnessing. The language used to express the foundational experience of Christ's resurrection was Koine Greek. It had its own specific terminology and grammar. As Christianity spread into the Syrian region, Semitic languages such as Aramaic and Syriac became the means by which the original experience of Christ—the "Christ event"—was communicated.

Given that the fundamental purpose of translation is to bridge the gap between immediate experience and conceptualisation, a variety of conceptualisations is inevitable. This is because conceptualisations are always closely linked to language and culture. Because of the diversity of languages and cultures, conceptualisations will always be plural. A wide range of meanings will emerge from the various conceptualisations referring to the original experience.[9] As the original

[9] Due to the transcendent character of the foundational event of Christianity—Christ's resurrection—it is no coincidence that there are four Gospels bearing witness to the "Christ event." Any attempt to compose a harmonisation of the Gospels disregards the inevitable translation of the immediate experience of the original event into any conceptualisation.

experience emerges from a unique disclosure situation, it sheds new light on reality. Yet it is always received by an individual with their own specific perception of reality.

From a hermeneutical perspective, the task of theology would be to evaluate the plurality of meanings and determine their appropriateness to the original experience. Theology must outline the particular meaning and significance of the original experience of Christ. This task is ever more challenging because the original experience, by its very nature, transcends human comprehension. Therefore, it always relies on witnesses.[10]

Once a particular conceptualisation has been established in doctrine, liturgy or the life of the Church, the subsequent task of theology is to translate it into other languages and cultures, while always referring to the original experience which is expressed by the variety of initial conceptualisations.

During the history of the Church, processes of translation could not be avoided when transmitting the core message of Christianity to cultures that are different from the Hellenistic culture. Each time, one faces a process of translation. The early Christian experience plays a pivotal role. Their cultural character and language profoundly shaped the initial proclamation of the core message of Christianity. The role of theology today is to continue to translate the gospel for different cultures, thus going beyond the initial witnesses of Christ's resurrection. In doing so, theology plays a significant role in the dissemination of the Christian faith.

From a theological perspective, fundamental questions are raised by processes of translation. For example, how can the validity of the Christian witness be evaluated? Which terms should be used to accurately describe the original experience of the Christ event? What criteria can be used to determine the most appropriate or even "correct" way to bear witness to Christ? What do the terms "appropriateness" and "correctness" mean with respect to the Christian *kerygma*? These questions always arise when the Gospel is translated into a new language and adopted by a new culture.[11]

Obviously, there is no impartial third party that can evaluate the translation process. The Protestant exegete Rudolf Bultmann has argued that a possible criterion for evaluating the success of a specific translation of the gospel is whether the significance and meaning of the original event is conveyed in the new language.[12] However, referring to the significance of the original Christ event for contempo-

[10] For Lessing, dependence on testimony is the weak point of any positive religion, insofar as it can only rely on statements made by witnesses: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, "On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power," in *Lessing: Philosophical and Theological Writings*, trans. and ed. Hugh Barr Nisbet (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[11] See Gianluca De Candia, *Die Dynamik des Wortes. Fortwährende Übersetzung als Prinzip christlicher Überlieferung* (Freiburg: Herder, 2025).

[12] See Rudolf Bultmann, "Jesus and the Eschatological Kingdom," in *Rudolf Bultmann: Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era*, ed. Robert A. Johnson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 91–102.

raries or later generations marks a shift from witnessing the foundational experience of Christ's resurrection to existential experiences that confirm one's personal belief and warrant the truth of the original kerygma.

Such a shift is not without ambivalence. Throughout Church history, what may be called "faithful obedience to the gospel" has been interpreted in many different ways. The ideal of poverty, for instance, as promoted by Saint Francis and his followers, differs significantly from the Calvinistic valuing of richness as a sign of God's election—not to mention the so-called "prosperity gospel" spread by Evangelicals in Africa. Consequently, the challenge of establishing suitable criteria to evaluate different interpretations of the founding event of Christianity persists.

Ecclesial Identity by "Cultural Imperialism"?

When the foundational kerygma of Christianity is being translated into different cultures, the question might be asked to what extent and in which way the Christian faith, its doctrine and moral discipline can appropriately be expressed in different languages. The task is made more difficult by the fact that there is no single language that transcends all languages and cultures. Since there is no single universal language that encompasses the plurality and diversity of languages and cultures, the translation process appears to be uncontrollable.

Things were different in the past. For centuries, the Roman magisterium claimed to have the expertise and authority to evaluate the translation of Christian doctrine and practice into non-Western cultures. Such a claim, however, has repeatedly had deplorable consequences. One example are the debates surrounding the acceptance of Chinese ancestor rites by the magisterium in the seventeenth century.[13] During and after the Second Vatican Council, the inculturation of liturgy was fiercely debated. Today, in the context of establishing global synodality, questions of moral behaviour are the focus of much debate.[14]

The persisting claim of the Roman dicasteries to dominance in teaching the Christian faith reveals deep ambivalence. On the one hand, they claim to preserve the truth of the Christian faith. The Roman authorities see themselves as guardians of the Church's unity.[15] They assert their role as safeguarding the common faith shared by all Catholics worldwide. On the other hand, adhering to a single

[13] See George Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy: From Its Beginning to Modern Times* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985); David E. Mungello ed., *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1994).

[14] It suffices to point to the widely varying moral assessments of homosexuality, polygamy, gender equality and contraception in different regions of the Catholic Church around the world.

[15] A major point that the Roman side raised in a critical way when talking about the "Synodal Path" in Germany was the potential endangerment of the unity of the Catholic Church.

tradition—namely, the tradition of the Western, "Latin" Church—resulted in the formation of a global Church that was frequently characterised more by its Roman character than by its commitment to God's revelation. The "truth of the Gospel"—which is by no means clear or unambiguous in every time and circumstance—became subordinate to the quest for ecclesial identity. "Ecclesial identity," in turn, was for Catholics primarily defined by obedience to the Roman pontiff and participation in the sacramental life of the Church as ordered by the magisterium and canon law.[16] Such an identity was a conceptual construction that distinguished the Catholic Church from the Orthodox, Protestant and Anglican churches. It was confirmed through practices of piety, such as the veneration of saints and Mary, the mother of Christ, as well as particular doctrines, such as the conceptualisation of the Eucharistic presence as "transubstantiation."

Emphasising the impact of the struggle for ecclesial identity over listening to the Gospel does not negate the importance of establishing an identity for the well-being of individuals or groups. It is absolutely necessary to identify a set of qualities or beliefs that characterise a person or group in order to develop a stable self-concept. The self-concept, in turn, is shaped by multilayered social and cultural factors. Personal identity is acquired by the individual, but it also depends on how others perceive and acknowledge them. It can originate from traits or attributes that individuals may have little or no control over, such as their family background or ethnicity. Personal identity provides a sense of self-control and meaning and serves as a behavioural compass within communities and society. It can result in a shared sense of belonging to a group that shares common behaviours and beliefs.[17]

The existence of identity markers is an inevitable social phenomenon in human communities. These markers determine membership of and belonging to social groups. Conversely, they can also be used to exclude or excommunicate individuals. The same applies to the Church in relation to her doctrine and discipline. Belief in a Trinitarian God or in the Incarnation, for example, is an identity marker for Christianity in relation to non-Christian religions. Similarly, acceptance of the primacy of the pope is an identity marker for Catholic Christians.

According to Vatican II, the Church is both a spiritual entity and a social body. The Council conceives the Church as a "complex reality" (*realitas complexa*) … "the society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the

[16] Roberto Card. Bellarmin, *Disputationes de controversiis Christianae fidei adversus huius temporis haereticos* (Ingolstadt: David Sartorius, 1586–1593) IV 3, 2: "(Ecclesiam esse) coetum hominum eiusdem christianae fidei professione colligatum, et eorundem Sacramentorum communione collegatum, sub regimine legitimorum pastorum, ac praecipue unius Christi in terris Vicarii Romani Pontificis."

[17] A wide variety of literature is available on the subject of "identity" and the many different meanings of the term. On individual and social identity, see: James E. Cote and Charles Levine, *Identity Formation, Agency, and Culture* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002).

spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element."[18] By unifying spiritual and social dimensions, the Church bears a resemblance to the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures of Christ.[19] The Church's institutional aspects can be legitimately evaluated using sociological and political science methods, provided these methods do not claim to analyse the Church's reality exhaustively.[20]

The search for an ecclesial identity is not illegitimate. The Church is both a "society" and "more than a society." The Council's reference to the hypostatic union of divine and human nature in Christ highlights the fact that the Church's status as a society is not diminished by its status as "more than a society." The spiritual dimension of the Church does not undermine its social character; rather, it affirms and strengthens it. Therefore, the quest for identity markers of the Church such as dogmas or moral norms is both natural and theologically legitimate.

However, identity markers are inescapably conditioned by language and culture. A certain dogma is formulated in a specific language, usually Greek or Latin. It might be better understood in future if modified terminology were applied. A moral norm reflects the culture in which it is formed. Therefore, establishing identity markers must take into account changing insights into natural phenomena, social practices and interpretations of reality.

When critically evaluating the conditioning of identity markers, it is mandatory for Christians to consider God's revelation throughout history as criteria. Christians cannot simply construct their own identity through consensus or deliberation. It is God's revelation to humanity that must direct and shape the identity of the Church.[21]

The temptation here is to uncritically equate historically conditioned identity markers with the content of God's revelation and the will of God. In this regard,

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[18] Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), no. 8, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

[19] See Avery Dulles, "The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*," *Renewal within Tradition*, ed. Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Peter Hünermann, "Theologischer Kommentar zur dogmatischen Konstitution über die Kirche *Lumen gentium*," *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, ed. Peter Hünermann and Bernd Jochen Hilberath, vol. 2 (Freiburg: Herder, 2004), 365–71.

[20] See Dirk Ansorge, "*Dialogue Ad Intra*: The Relevance of *Lumen Gentium* and *Christus Dominus* for a Synodal Church," *Verbum Vitae* 44, no. 1 (2026): 97–112.

[21] The fact that the Church is not a democracy does not exclude the performance of democratic procedures in decision-making and accountability in ecclesial administration—including the episcopacy. In religious orders, participation in decision-making and even voting is widespread.

different Christian churches have adopted different approaches. Protestants regard the Holy Scriptures as a self-interpreting source of the Christian faith, whereas Catholics see the Church's magisterium as a guideline for correctly understanding divine revelation.[22] Both traditions invoke the guidance of the Holy Spirit: Protestants invoke it to guide their interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, while Catholics invoke it to support the magisterial authority of the pope and bishops. Obviously, Christians come up with different identity markers for their respective churches, as ordained by God.

Given the vast cultural differences around the globe, acknowledging the authority of the magisterium does not prevent the Catholic Church from having widely differing interpretations of what Catholics should believe and do. In this respect, it sometimes seems that the debates are not always exclusively about the truth of the Gospel, but rather about marking one's own identity as the Catholic Church vis-à-vis society, other religious communities or deviating groups within Catholicism. These debates, which are often thought to deal exclusively with theological topics, are significantly impacted by cultural conditions.

Culturally Shaped Conflicts in the Church

Currently, there is a great deal of conflict within the Church regarding what should serve as identity markers for Catholics. The American episcopate is characterised by diametrically opposed positions on abortion in cases of sexual abuse or marital violence. Some African bishops believe that accepting homosexuality as part of God's creative work would mean renouncing the Catholic faith. Others believe that the exclusion of women from ordained ministry goes against the spirit of the Gospel and the way Jesus treated women. Disputes over the correct way to celebrate the liturgy often divide Catholic communities. In light of the abuse scandal, some argue that structures of accountability must be established in ecclesiastical decision-making, while others insist on the episcopacy's exclusive power.

Certainly, one should not deny the goodwill of those involved. This raises the question all the more: How can one *theologically* evaluate such divergences within the Catholic Church? How can people with diametrically opposed opinions refer to the same gospel and ecclesial tradition?

Even a brief glance at the complex history of the Church shows that the ethical conduct of the faithful, liturgical rites or ecclesial structures do not derive from divine revelation alone. Rather, they are the result of human orientation in a specific cultural context at a given time. Insistence on concrete structures within the Church, a specific form of liturgy, a particular concept of humanity or particular

[22] Vgl. Walter Mostert, "Scriptura sui ipsius interpres. Bemerkungen zum Verständnis der Heiligen Schrift durch Luther," *Lutherjahrbuch* 46 (1979): 60–96; Oda Wischmeyer, "Sola scriptura, claritas scripturae und sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres: Kritische Überlegungen aus exegetischer und hermeneutischer Sicht," *Zeitschrift für Neues Testament* 20 (2017): 229–42.

norms of ethical conduct is an expression of a specific interpretation of divine revelation. Such understanding is always deeply shaped by cultural circumstances.

From a theological perspective such dependence is a result of the incarnational dimension of divine revelation.[23] Nevertheless, theological expertise and reflection are needed on how to evaluate the dependence of belief and behaviour in the Church on cultural contexts.

Here, the ongoing process of "provincializing European theology" comes into play. It would be presumptuous to claim that European theology has a monopoly on the correct interpretation of Christianity in any given cultural context. Rather, a comprehensive exchange of theological ideas and concepts is necessary to interpret the Gospel and Christian tradition in relation to a given culture. This exchange of ideas and concepts does not rule out the possibility that a certain lack of mutual understanding will remain in the end.

Moreover, it would be naive not to consider the power structures inherent in such an exchange. This is particularly true when it comes to the Roman magisterium. According to canon law, the magisterium has the power to rule on disputed matters and implement decrees relating to administration, liturgy and other subjects.[24] The institutional power of the Roman dicasteries is normally considered as a "service to the unity of the Church." That is certainly true, and at once complex. Since the identity of the Church is grounded in God's revelation, the norms in ecclesial matters or moral discipline must primarily serve the truth of the Gospel. The Gospel, in turn, speaks with many voices. It does not provide precise answers to many contemporary challenges, such as climate change, migration and new technologies. With this in mind, the Roman authorities should aim to be transparent in their decision-making and be available to explain why they have decided on a particular approach to understanding and applying the message of the Gospels to specific situations.[25]

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[23] See Rowan Williams, "Trinity and Revelation," *Modern Theology* 2, no. 3 (1986): 197–212, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.1986.tb00114.x; Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018).

[24] See CIC, can. 749, § 1–2, on the infallibility of the pope and the episcopacy in communion with the pope.

[25] The demand for transparency is also stressed by the *Final Document* of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (2024) when advocating for a "culture of transparency, accountability and evaluation" (no. 12; 80; 95–98): "Transparency and accountability should not only be invoked when it comes to sexual, financial and other forms of abuse. These practices also concern the lifestyle of pastors, pastoral planning, methods of evangelisation, and the way in which the Church respects human dignity, for example, in regard to the working conditions within its institutions." XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Document: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), no. 98, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/vademecum/en_vade.pdf.

The Future Role of European Theology

Like other institutions, the Catholic Church knows two types of identity markers: those that are generally accepted as indisputable and, consequently, are considered as immutable. Alongside there are other, more marginal identity markers. These are valued differently in different cultural contexts. They are subject to changes and alteration.

In daily Church life, many of the aforementioned disputed issues serve as identity markers, shaped by a specific understanding of God's revelation and a particular concept of the Church. However, such understanding is deeply shaped by cultural conditions and regional customs. From a theological perspective, the challenge is to distinguish between those identity markers that are considered essential and those that may be subject to change in accordance with the constant development of culture.

In this inevitable process of discernment, theologians working in different cultural contexts must evaluate which identity markers are essential for an appropriate understanding of divine revelation in a given context and which should be modified to better serve the gospel. They should carry out this task in permanent dialogue with the relevant authorities in Rome, as well as communicating with colleagues on other continents.

In this global exchange of ideas, the role of European theology will be subsidiary. It can reflect on its rich traditions of theological reasoning, but it should not claim global normative authority.[26] By acknowledging its own cultural conditioning, European theology can encourage non-European theologies to do the same. In this way, European or Western theology will be able to provide a valuable service to other theologians worldwide. Being aware of its own cultural conditioning, European theology can inspire processes of translating the Christian *kerygma* into different cultures on a global scale. Self-consciousness and self-critique of European theology can serve as a model for non-European theologies without claiming to be universally normative.

Nevertheless, when accepting the cultural conditioning of theology and practice within the Catholic Church, one might be concerned that such diversification means abandoning the Church's shared values and universally binding norms. To be more specific: can one tolerate the condemnation of homosexuality by many African bishops as an authentic interpretation of the Gospel within a given cultural context? Another issue is the exclusion of women from ordained ministry, which—not least—raises questions about the relationship between ecclesial

[26] Dirk Ansorge, "Thomas d'Aquin à Abidjan: Dans quelle mesure la tradition occidentale de la théologie est-elle normative pour les chrétiens d'Afrique?" in *L'Afrique et l'Europe. Pense le Défi d'un Rencontre*, ed. Franz Gmainer-Pranzl and Rodrigue M. Noartangar, Groupe Africain de Recherche en Philosophie Interculturelle 2 (Abidjan: Presses de l'ITCJ, 2025), 161–80.

norms and human rights.[27] What is needed is an ecclesiological concept of "diversity within unity" and the admittance that, from an ecclesiological perspective, differences within the Church are legitimate.[28]

European theology is currently aware of the challenges and limitations of its own reasoning. To serve the global Catholic Church, it should contribute its historical experience and expertise to the global theological discourses. By doing so, despite being "provincialized," European theology could significantly contribute to the Church's future credibility in an ever-changing world.

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[27] The ongoing debate about the universality of human rights offers theologians a valuable lesson: to what extent was the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights shaped by Western culture and individualism, making it an expression of Western colonialism? To what extent can the rules of the declaration be applied independently of its historical context? These questions have been raised in particular by Islamic scholars, leading to the publication of several "Muslim declarations of human rights."

[28] In this sense, the *Final Document* of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the concept of synodality expresses: "A synodal style allows local Churches to move at different paces. Differences in pace can be valued as an expression of legitimate diversity and as an opportunity for sharing gifts and mutual enrichment" (no. 124).

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FROM SCHOLARS TO DESIGNERS, FROM LEADERS TO NETWORKERS: DOING SOCIALLY RELEVANT THEOLOGIES

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Abstract

This chapter is inspired by Pope Francis's *Veritatis gaudium* (4–5), in which theologians are invited to be creative and capable of not only engaging in dialogue with a pluralistic society, but also of exerting influence on it. This represents a significant challenge for the field of theology, as it aims to be socially relevant. This task requires that theologians immerse themselves in the contemporary world, engaging with real-life individuals, while also specializing in theological discourse. The variety of approaches within European countries is indicative of the multifaceted nature of this undertaking. The relevance of theological discourse depends on two factors: the position of the theologian in designing novel methodologies for spreading the Gospel to the people, and the networks within which they operate. The identification of theological fields demonstrating social relevance, and the subsequent facilitation of access to these fields, are therefore of great importance.

Keywords: Theological hermeneutics; social relevance; *Veritatis Gaudium*; contextual theology; *loci theologici*; theological method; synodality.

Introduction

Pope Francis's *Veritatis gaudium* (4–5), which invites theologians to be creative and capable not only of engaging in dialogue with a pluralistic society but also of influencing it, presents a significant challenge for the field of theology as it seeks to remain socially relevant. This task requires theologians to immerse themselves in the contemporary world and engage with real people, while simultaneously cultivating expertise in theological discourse. The diversity of approaches across European countries reflects the multifaceted nature of this undertaking. The relevance of theological discourse depends on two factors: the theologian's ability to

design innovative methodologies for communicating the Gospel, and the networks within which they operate.[1]

Drawing on experience gained in the intercultural contexts of Poland, Spain, and now Austria, the current theological landscape appears deeply shaped by a plurality of philosophies, anthropologies, and "regimes of truth" that are reshaping both the identity and the role of theologians. On one hand, our mission is undergoing a profound shift: "*from being scholars, we become designers*,"[2] compelled to sustain an ongoing dialogue with the sciences and with society amid paradigms increasingly described as VUCA.[3] On the other hand, an older generation of leaders is retiring and passing away. Confronted with this "loss of great theological figures,"[4] the nature of leadership itself is being reconfigured into a more modest, network-oriented form.

The questions that emerge today concern not only the role of theologians but the very meaning and purpose of theology itself. What, in fact, is theology, and where does its proper locus lie? What future can it claim? Can—and should—it aspire to social relevance, and for what ends? Is theology simply the sum of what theologians do? If so, the theological mission is undergoing a profound redefinition, particularly if "doing theology from existential peripheries"[5] continues to be perceived as a compelling and credible vocation. These questions do not merely invite reflection; they demand a reorientation of theological practice in light of shifting cultural, epistemic, and ecclesial landscapes.

Aim, Structure, Methodology

The aim of this chapter is, first, to reflect on the paradigm shift currently taking place in theology, with particular attention to the vision, mission, and goals of the discipline within the horizon of social relevance. This reflection seeks to clarify how theology can—and should—be socially meaningful today. Secondly, the chapter addresses the question of what it means to be a theologian in this context. Which attitudes are required of theologians in the midst of this paradigm shift—creativity, imagination, empathy, humility? And what contributions might these dispositions offer to the mission of the Church?

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[1] Antonina Wozna, Mary Daly's (1928–2010) Theological Method of Ontolinguistic Hermeneutics (Cham: Springer, 2025), 3. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-80660-5.

[2] José Ignacio González Faus, "Qué dice el Espíritu a la Iglesia: La Teología del siglo XXI como escucha del Espíritu," *Revista Carthaginensia* XXXV, no. 68 (2019): 303–21, at 305.

[3] Lieven Boeve, "Recontextualising Theology at the University in Europe," in *Theology and the University*, ed. Fáinche Ryan, Dirk Ansorge, Josef Quitterer (London: Routledge, 2024), 200.

[4] González Faus, "Qué dice," 302.

[5] Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, *Doing Theology from Existential Peripheries* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2021).

The methodology intersects three different sources. First, it draws on the conclusions of the seminar "*The Future of Theology*," held by the *Cristianisme i Justícia* Research Network in Barcelona (Spain) during the 2024–2025 academic year,[6] in which twenty scholars from various theological fields and regions of Spain shared their academic and pastoral experiences as well as their ongoing research on specific topics. Second, it engages elements of ontolinguistic theological hermeneutics, including the proposal of a double hermeneutical movement in theology—from credibility to relevance.[7] Third, it considers a range of contemporary research on the development of theological thought sixty years after the Second Vatican Council, illustrated by international congresses such as the one held in Rome in 2024,[8] as well as monographic issues of journals dedicated to the future of theology (e.g., *ET-Studies* 2025,[9] *Proyección* 2024–2025,[10] *Limina* 2023,[11] *Carthaginensia* 2019[12]). Additionally, the monograph "*Theology and the University*"[13] is examined as an example of a hermeneutic community of believers in dialogue with the scientific community.

An innovative methodological element of this study is a survey conducted among more than fifty theologians from Europe and Latin America, representing different ages and stages of their careers. They were asked how they understand "socially relevant theology" and whether they consider it necessary. The results presented in this chapter may not constitute a sociological analysis in the strict sense, yet they remain significant—especially if we recognize, on the one hand, that "global" knowledge is never truly universal and, on the other hand, that a purely particular perspective is insufficient for drawing meaningful conclusions.[14]

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[6] Cristianisme i Justícia, "Seminarios internos," Seminario Teológico, accessed February 2, 2026, https://www.cristianismeijusticia.net/es/seminarios-internos.

[7] Wozna, *Mary Daly's (1928–2010)*, 7.

[8] Vatican Dicastery for Culture and Education, *The Future of Theology: Legacy and Envisioning*, December 9–10, 2024. Pontificia Università Lateranense, Rome, accessed February 2, 2026, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/december/documents/20241209-convegno-teologia.html.

[9] *ET-Studies: Journal of the European Society for Catholic Theology* 16, no. 1 (2025), accessed February 1, 2026, https://poj.peeters-leuven.be/content.php?url=issue&journal_code=ETS&issue=1&vol=16.

[10] *Revista Proyección*, "Teología y mundo actual" no. 295–299 (2024–2025). https://revistas.uloyola.es/ptma.

[11] *Limina. Grazer Theologische Perspektiven* 6, no. 1–2 (2023), accessed February 1, 2026, https://unipub.uni-graz.at/limina.

[12] *Revista Carthaginensia*, "El futuro de la Teología; la Teología del futuro" 35, no. 68 (2019). https://revistacarthaginensia.com/CARTHAGINENSIA/issue/view/16.

[13] Fáinche Ryan, Dirk Ansorge and Josef Quitterer, eds., *Theology and the University* (London and New York: Routledge, 2024).

[14] Linn Tonstad, "(Un)wise Theologians: Systematic Theology in the University," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 22, no. 4 (2020): 494–511.

The threefold structure of this chapter—vision, mission, and goal of theology—aims to address how (and whether) theology can be socially relevant, as well as what advantages this relevance may bring to our vocation as theologians within the Church. To this end, the chapter begins by outlining a vision of theology, offering a series of definitions that frame the current debates. A playful yet insightful allegory of our *locus theologiae*, using the image of the "*cathedra*" or "chair" and its caricatured phenomenological interpretation,[15] provides a provocative metaphor for how theologians appear and act. This metaphor invites us to question what we are actually doing, and with what motivations and purposes. At this stage, several insights from Thomas Aquinas are revisited—particularly his understanding of theology as a method rather than an end in itself, a path shaped by the experience of God. From this experiential foundation, certain criteria of "relevance" emerge, linking intellectual effort with pleasure, persuasion, and desire—dimensions that do not contradict moral integrity.

Afterward, we present several insights into the mission of theology understood as socially relevant. The results of the survey analysis will be discussed, highlighting some surprising impressions expressed by theologians depending on their country of origin. Unlike in most of the countries represented in the survey—such as Poland, Spain, Argentina, Guatemala, Bolivia, and Greece—within German-speaking contexts theology is generally perceived as socially relevant.

Following the conviction of the majority of respondents that theology should indeed be relevant, the third part of the chapter sketches how theology can become socially relevant without losing its hermeneutical specificity, and which ethical attitudes are required of theologians in order to achieve the kind of authenticity that underlies genuine relevance—echoing St. Paul's exhortation to "have the same attitude as Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5). The attitudes most essential for theologians engaged in socially relevant theology include imagination, humility, and creativity.

In the concluding section, several examples of "networkers" and "designers" are presented as models for contemporary theologians, illustrating how these figures can be adapted to the concept of relevance in ways that inspire theologians on their path of experiencing and transmitting the reality of God. The attitudinal requirements of new generations of theologians are highlighted as essential for increasing relevance in communicating the Gospel to a society that appears to be changing—at times—more rapidly than theologians themselves.

Vision of Theology

Following *Veritatis gaudium*, doing theology cannot limit itself "to transmitting to the men and women of our time, who are eager to grow in their Christian awareness, knowledge, skills and experience"; theologians must also take on "the urgent task of developing intellectual tools that can be proposed as paradigms of

[15] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

action and thought, useful for proclamation in a world marked by ethical-religious pluralism. This requires not only a profound theological awareness, but also the ability to conceive, design and realize systems of presentation of the Christian religion that are capable of penetrating into diverse cultural systems."[16] This text introduces a double perspective within theology: an intellectual dimension and an experiential or sapiential one, connecting reason and heart, effectivity and affectivity, credibility and relevance.

Theology as a Science

Classical definitions of theology—such as *faith seeking understanding*, *the science of faith*, or even *the science of God*[17]—emphasize that the task of theology is the living exploration of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. It expresses the desire to understand God's presence among us through revelation and testimony, in which the witness's attitude of faith is central.[18] Other definitions highlight theology as a scientific search for truth and knowledge within the university, aimed at developing a contemporary understanding of faith and a lived faith within the Church—an understanding that contributes to both individual and communal identity in a post-Christian and post-secular society.[19]

Theology as Belief and Attitude

The other vision privileges the intersection of existential and subjective reasons with the vocation to respond to Revelation as a gift and initiative that comes from the Trinitarian God. Beginning with Evagrius Ponticus in the fourth century, who affirmed that theology is "to pray correctly,"[20] Sharon Rider paraphrases this insight by suggesting that theology is what we research, believe in, and seek to understand.[21] This process requires a specific epistemic attitude on the part of the

[16] Francis, *Veritatis gaudium. Apostolic Constitution on Universities and Ecclesiastical Faculties* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018).

[17] Ethna Regan, "The 'Problem' of Theology in the University? Irish Compromises and Solutions," in *Theology and the University*, ed. Fáinche Ryan, Dirk Ansorge and Josef Quitterer (London: Routledge, 2024), 98.

[18] Michael Conway, "*Vetera novis augure*: New Tasks for Theology," in *Theology and the University*, ed. Fáinche Ryan, Dirk Ansorge and Josef Quitterer (London and New York: Routledge, 2024), 141.

[19] Boeve, "Recontextualising," 192.

[20] Sarah Coakley, "La Trinidad, el deseo y la disputa contemporánea sobre el género," in *Trinidad, deseo y subversión. La vida trinitaria de las mujeres*, ed. Montserrat Escribano-Cárcel (Estella: Verbo Divino 2021), 16.

[21] Sharon Rider, "Higher Education as a Road to Somewhere," in *Theology and the University*, ed. Fáinche Ryan, Dirk Ansorge and Josef Quitterer (London: Routledge, 2024), 11.

scholar.[22] Theology—grounded in the notion of relationality—offers unexpected perspectives within methodological reflection on the nature of knowledge and on science itself.[23]

Theology is understood as wisdom,[24] in the double epistemological sense of the Latin word "*sapere*": both "to know" something and "to taste" or "to delight in" it. Johnson maintains that the role of theology is "to serve people."[25] Latin American Liberation Theology defines it as a critical reflection on Christian praxis in light of the Word of God—"being shaken by the situations of others."[26]

Theology as a Method

When it comes to attitude, experience becomes the crucial point of reference for establishing mastery in any field of science. Experience makes "the difference between riding a horse and reading about horses in a veterinary manual."[27] But what kind of experience can be considered in the case of theology?

Thomas Aquinas suggests that theology is a method—etymologically, a *path*—toward experiencing God. It offers an integrated and balanced vision that unites scientific inquiry, belief, and disposition, bringing together intellectual, affective, and volitional dimensions in accordance with human faculties and the classical triad of *verum*, *bonum*, and *pulchrum*.

In the *Prima pars* of the *Summa theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas examines the nature of God, human knowledge of God, and the ways in which human language can meaningfully name God. Particularly relevant for an exploration of these trinitarian reflections are questions 12–13 in *De Deo uno*, which address knowing and naming God, and questions 29–32 in *De Deo trino*, which consider the knowledge and naming of the divine persons. In questions 12–13, Thomas draws

[22] Josef Quitterer, "Assuming True Beliefs: The Contribution of Theology to a Health University," in *Theology and the University*, ed. Fáinche Ryan, Dirk Ansorge, Josef Quitterer (London: Routledge, 2024), 178.

[23] Robert Wozniak, "The University and the Relationship between Theology and the 'Concert of Sciences,'" in *Theology and the University*, ed. Fáinche Ryan, Dirk Ansorge and Josef Quitterer (London: Routledge, 2024), 144.

[24] Serge-Thomas Bonino, "The Genetic Code of Catholic Theology: 'Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria,'" in *Theology and the University*, ed. Fáinche Ryan, Dirk Ansorge and Josef Quitterer (London: Routledge, 2024), 116.

[25] Elisabeth Johnson, *Rico en misericordia. Teología al servicio del pueblo de Dios* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 2016).

[26] Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Outing Theology: Thinking Christianity out of the Church Closet," *Feminist Theology* 9, no. 27 (2001): 57–67, https://doi.org/10.1177/096673500100002705.

[27] Conway, "*Vetera novis*," 150.

on his doctrine of the analogy of being to argue that God is known through creation—that is, through God's effects. As Catherine LaCugna observes,[28] for Thomas, naming God must correspond to the way we know God; we know God on the basis of creatures because we cannot know God's essence directly. In this sense, human beings cannot know *what* God is, but only *that* God is. This epistemological framework is further illuminated in contemporary scholarship, such as Gilles Mongeau's analysis of Aquinas's theological method as a form of transforming wisdom.

Mongeau[29] emphasizes the fundamentally oral character of the *Summa theologiae*, which was dictated to scribes and reflects the dynamics of live academic disputation with fellow scholars and students. Its structure mirrors oral debate, particularly in the articulation of objections and responses, and this feature has prompted a renewed hermeneutical appreciation of Thomism. On this view, theology is not conceived as an abstract or purely speculative science but as a pathway toward the lived experience of God. Consequently, theological instruction aims not only at intellectual comprehension but also at the formation of virtue, drawing students affectively toward God through persuasive and dialogical methods.

As contemporary interpreters note, Aquinas's theological method is deeply rooted in the medieval arts of language—grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric—which together form the *trivium*. These linguistic arts, alongside the *quadrivium*, shaped a pedagogy oriented toward practical wisdom. Theology therefore required the active participation of students, who were invited to exercise both intellect and disposition in order to share in divine wisdom. For Aquinas, knowledge involves not only cognitive reasoning but also the inclination of the heart toward the good.

This integration is evident in Aquinas's distinction between acquired wisdom and infused wisdom, which correspond to judgment formed *per modum scientiae* and *per modum inclinationis* or *connaturalitatis*. In the latter, correct judgment arises by analogy with the virtuous person, whose affective disposition aligns reason with love of the good. Reasonable judgment therefore involves both rational discourse and an affective orientation toward what is good here and now.

Aquinas's use of rhetoric—through examples, persuasive arguments, and concrete cases—plays a central methodological role in mediating between rational demonstration and ethical practice. For Aquinas, theology is a practical craft that participates in God's teaching activity throughout history and seeks the transformation of persons and communities. Ultimately, the *Summa* aims not merely to transmit knowledge but to awaken a desire for participation in divine wisdom—that is, in God.

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[28] Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity & Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 1.

[29] Gilles Mongeau, "Mystery on the Move: Aquinas's Theological Method as Transforming Wisdom," *The Thomist* 80, no. 2 (2016): 285–300.

Other examples of this approach can be found in the mysticism of the 16th century, as St. John of the Cross presents in his account of being drawn by divine love. Mysticism offers a way of knowing God through love, in which one not only understands but also *tastes* or *savors* the beloved.[30] These experiences are often lived in situations of vulnerability and even suffering.[31]

In the 20th century, similar approaches or intuitions can be traced in the work of Karl Rahner. According to him, a genuine Christian who lives the mysticism of everyday life possesses a bold—though often hidden—confidence that ordinary daily life is the essence of authentic existence and true Christianity.[32]

Mystical experience may be understood as one among the mediations through which the divine mystery becomes manifest. Karl Rahner famously contends that human existence is, in a fundamental sense, intrinsically mystical, proposing that "the Christian of the future will either be a mystic or will not exist as a Christian at all." In Rahner's usage, *mysticism* does not denote an extraordinary or esoteric state reserved for a spiritual elite; rather, it designates the structure of experience itself, wherein every genuinely personal act of consciousness bears an implicit and originary encounter with God. On this account, human beings are, at their core, religious and grace-filled creatures—constitutively oriented toward transcendence and disposed to receive, within the horizon of ordinary life, the human word through which the divine Word may be disclosed.[33]

Caricatures of *Loci Theologici* and Their Provocation for Theology

Loci theologici denotes the common topics or "places" of theology that signal points of relevance both for theological reflection and for the context in which such reflection takes shape. In recent discourse, critical perspectives have raised questions concerning the locations from which theology originates, particularly with regard to the scholar's situatedness and positionality. The ecclesial vision of a "Church that goes forth" or "goes out"[34] stands in tension with the environments in which many theologians reside, conduct their work, and locate their sources of inspiration. By contrast, a mystical theology of daily life seeks to displace theology from the confines of the "desktop" and situate it within the ordinary spaces

[30] Miguel Díaz, *Queer God de amor* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022).

[31] Antonina Wozna, "Attitude of Hope in the Poetry of St. John of the Cross in Context of Ethics of Ambiguity and Spiritual Abuse," *Religions* 17, no. 1 (2026): 1–28.

[32] Díaz, *Queer God*, 6.

[33] Johannes Thüne, "Der Fromme von morgen wird ein Mystiker sein, einer, der etwas erfahren hat, oder er wird nicht mehr sein (Karl Rahner)," *Limina. Grazer Theologische Perspektiven* 6, no. 2 (2023): 97.

[34] Francis, "*Angelus*," September 20, 2020, https://press.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2020/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20200920.html.

where God's transformative triune life is encountered in the lived experiences of real persons.[35]

Traditional, desk-centred habits of inquiry continue to shape theological practice. Ahmed,[36] reflecting on the opening of Husserl's first volume of *Ideas*, notes that philosophical reflection begins at the writing table. The table becomes present because it is the object nearest to the philosopher's body. The very appearance of *this* table—rather than any other—already reveals something of phenomenology's orientation and, perhaps, of the orientation of philosophy more broadly. Philosophy's recurring fascination with tables is not accidental: tables function as the horizontal surfaces upon which philosophical thought is inscribed, imagined as planes positioned before the philosopher and directed toward the act of writing.

In this sense, the table itself is shaped through this intentional relation. "Tables and chairs, things nearest to hand for the sedentary philosopher, are the furniture of 'that room of one's own' from which the real world is observed."[37] As what lies "near at hand," tables and chairs help secure the very site of philosophical activity. They disclose philosophy's orientation by indicating what is closest to the philosopher's body—what the philosopher repeatedly encounters through touch and proximity. Accordingly, the appearance of the table reflects the distinct orientations that philosophy adopts in relation to its objects.

Yet this orientation simultaneously provokes questions of disorientation: what lies beyond the four walls of the philosopher's study? If philosophy possesses its tables, where are its *cathedrae*—and who, precisely, enters the cathedral? The sharp force of the analogy consists in its very emptiness. At the threshold (*limen*), Heidegger reminds us that philosophy is what philosophers do. This, however, invites a further inquiry: if philosophy is defined by its practice, then what becomes of theology—and where does it take place?

Could this provocative example not also apply to theological work? What do we, as theologians, actually do, see, or touch? Theologians produce theological texts through their bodies, yet the written page often presents itself as radically disembodied. Theology appears as pure abstraction—carefully handwritten or typed—while concealing the bodily labor that renders it possible: aching wrists and shoulders, a seated body in a particular place, perhaps in a well-worn IKEA office chair scratched by mischievous cats, typing on an Apple computer and thus already entangled with other animals, global capitalism, and the exploitation of both human and natural resources. The scene may even include the presence of desire—perhaps expressed in the anticipation of a lover's arrival.

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[35] Shawn Copeland and Laurie Cassidy eds., *Desire, Darkness, and Hope: Theology in a Time of Impasse: Engaging the Thought of Constance FitzGerald, OCD* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2021), 50.

[36] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 3.

[37] Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 66.

As Marcella Althaus-Reid suggests,[38] this tension gestures toward a mystical vision of theology that refuses to separate embodiment from thought. This vision is particularly compelling insofar as it holds in productive unity what is so frequently segregated: the intellectual mainstream and spirituality, ethical responsibility and intellectual labor, and theoretical reflection and lived practice. Thus, theology emerges not as an abstract system estranged from life, but as a materially situated, ethically inflected, and spiritually oriented mode of inquiry.

As she continues: "In order to become orientated, you might suppose that we must first experience disorientation." Within this shifting paradigm of theology, are we not at times uncertain about where to direct our energies? *Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also* (Mt 6:21). This points to the ongoing necessity of re-positioning—indeed, of re-orientation.

"The Church is called to announce the Good News of Christ to all, in dialogue with the different sciences, in the service of an even deeper penetration and application of the truth in personal and social life, if we wish to take the principle of the Incarnation seriously."[39] For many Latinx theologians, *lo cotidiano* functions as a *locus theologicus* that provides content, particularizes context, and names the spaces and place(s) from which Latinx theologians[40] undertake theological reflection.

In light of these visions, one may ask how diverse theological positions or methodological starting points can be conceptualized. Furthermore, how might practical and theoretical proposals be integrated in a coherent and mutually enriching manner? The Pope continues:

> What the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness and proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after a battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol or about the level of his blood sugars—you have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds. And you have to start from the ground up.[41]

[38] Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Outing Theology: Thinking Christianity out of the Church Closet," *Feminist Theology* 9, no. 27 (2001): 57–67.

[39] Francis, *Veritatis gaudium*, 5.

[40] Carmen Nanko-Fernández, "Lo Cotidiano as Locus Theologicus," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology*, ed. Orlando Espín (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 15.

[41] Massimo Faggioli, "Theology between the University and the Church as a 'Field Hospital,'" in *Theology and the University*, ed. Fáinche Ryan, Dirk Ansorge and Josef Quitterer (London: Routledge, 2024), 54.

Loci Theologici Today

Attending to the textures of everyday life, postcolonial and queer theological perspectives insist that the concrete experiences of people must serve as the starting point for contextual theology—one that resists exclusion, particularly the exclusion of sexualities that struggle amid conditions of suffering and marginalization. As Miguel Díaz emphasizes,[42] theology shaped by lived realities rather than abstract speculation is intrinsically practical. These contextual horizons invite theologians to explore new pathways of diversity, pathways that carry profound ethical, practical, and pastoral implications.

This conviction likewise animates the project "*Doing Theology from the Existential Peripheries*," developed within the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. The project seeks to deepen and extend the vision of *Evangelii gaudium*, *Laudato si'*, and *Fratelli tutti* in view of the urgent need for a renewed theological method. By contrast, much academic theology appears slow to recognize the present change of epoch, as its dominant languages and agendas remain insufficiently responsive to contemporary social and ecclesial realities.

At the heart of this initiative lies a conviction dear to Pope Francis and deeply rooted in Latin American theology, as well as in Scripture and Tradition: those marginalized in countless ways are bearers of a distinctive wisdom capable of reopening theological discourses that have grown closed or stagnant. From within these lived experiences emerges a profound *sensus fidei*, one from which theological reflection must draw if it is to recover its transformative and ecclesial vitality.

Doing theology from the existential peripheries thus entails a decisive displacement—an intentional movement away from the comfort of our customary chairs toward a posture of genuine encounter and listening. It entails moving toward the "chair" of the poor and the unseen, asking where these peripheries are located and who inhabits them—those whom the Church too often overlooks or fails to recognize as authentic bearers of God's word.[43] Who, then, becomes visible when we allow our theological gaze to be formed from these margins? Migrants forced into precarious mobility; individuals who have endured violence, abuse, or systemic discrimination; children and women subjected to intersecting vulnerabilities; persons marginalized on the basis of gender; the economically impoverished; the trafficked and prostituted; people living with disabilities; and communities whose dignity is mirrored in polluted, degraded, and exploited environments. These faces—and the histories, sufferings, and wisdom they carry—constitute the indispensable interlocutors of a theology that seeks to be faithful to the Gospel and responsive to the signs of the times.

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[42] Díaz, *Queer God*, 18.

[43] Sergio Massironi et al. "Doing Theology from the Existential Peripheries," *Concilium* 2 (2024): 127–144.

The following chart summarizes the principal areas of focus of the project, so that kind of disruptive God-talking could be also contextualized.

Topics	
Europe-Mediterranean	Forgiveness vs. Justice; hope and benevolence, not searching for "judgement," "each human being is a world"; interreligious and intercultural.
North America	Exclusion and dehumanization of LGBTIQ+ community; parishes are not safe places; lack of inclusion of people with disabilities; integral ecology (ex.: cleaning and dignity of work); find God in interacting with others (look with God's eyes to the others) as a means of connection with God.
South America	Economic precarity, risk of losing a loved one (drug addiction); presence of God in the daily life (in a difficult situation); community as the place to feel the presence of God.
Africa	Leadership and solidarity (Church not elite but for the poor); care when the state does not (with people, not power); dignity and simple joys in life
Oceania	Climate change, loss of place, connected to the Earth equals destruction of themselves (*Creator Spirit* that gives life to everything).
Asia	Where is the inclusive church? Migrant mothers are not supported by the Church.

Chart 1: Schematic content of the results of the continental consultation of the Project: *Doing Theology from the Existential Peripheries*, developed in 2021 within the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. Own elaboration.

Mission and Relevancy of Theology

The aim of the survey—conducted with more than fifty theologians in Europe (25 participants from Spain, Austria, Germany, Poland, Belgium, and Greece) and Latin America (25 participants from Argentina, Mexico, and Guatemala), representing diverse sexes, ages, and stages of their academic careers—was to gather their perspectives on what is understood as "socially relevant theology" and to

assess whether they considered such a theology necessary. Although the sample size is insufficient for the findings to be sociologically representative, it nevertheless offers an initial indication of emerging tendencies and suggests a promising basis for further research on a broader scale.

The survey consisted of five thematic questions and one statistical question regarding the anonymity of public visibility of participation in the study. The questions were formulated in both English and Spanish. The opening question offered a simple "yes" or "no" response: *Do you think that, generally speaking, theology today is socially relevant?* This was followed by two open-ended questions inviting descriptive, belief-based responses: *What is "doing theology"? What does the term "theology" mean to you?* and: *How do you practice socially relevant theology?*

The final multiple-choice question asked respondents to identify their own professional self-perception: whether they viewed themselves primarily as Scholars, Networkers, Designers, or Leaders.

The responses to the first question revealed differing perceptions of the status of theological research among scholars from various national contexts. Three quarters of the German-speaking scholars agreed that theology remains socially relevant within their settings, whereas a similar proportion of Spanish-speaking academics expressed the opposite view. Nevertheless, all respondents—without exception—affirmed that theology *should be* socially relevant.

The definitions of theology offered by the respondents varied widely, reflecting different methodological, contextual, and personal orientations. Some articulated theology in methodological terms, describing it as "creating meaning and finding purpose" or as "reflecting on the sacred and divine, on creation including all living beings, and on the interrelatedness among them." Others emphasized contextual approaches, such as: "Doing theology is thinking about God, the foundations of the Christian religion (biblical texts, etc.), and the structure of the Church. Theology means for me reflecting on these realities while always keeping in view the contemporary world with its problems, difficulties, and challenges." For some, theology was oriented toward specific aims, including "understanding beliefs and grasping the Christian influence on culture." Finally, several responses revealed deeply personal convictions and self-identified research positions: "Theology means to me that there is something—something both transcendent and very present in this world—that encompasses all of our lives and the cosmos, and that from experiencing it comes responsibility to care for one another. Doing theology mostly from a feminist Christian background but reaching beyond."

When translated into the practical life of these scholars, social relevance would require the theologian to:

- Listen attentively to the stories and experiences of communities of accountability;

- Correlate theological reflection with socially significant and contemporary issues (such as migration);
- Cultivate meaningful connections with others and with concrete reality;
- Incorporate interdisciplinary themes and methods, including intersections with cultural, contextual, and political spheres;
- Engage in public theology that opens conversation with partners beyond the academy.

The strong emphasis on connection—to people, to communities, and to the world more broadly—indicates that theology cannot remain enclosed within an academic "bubble" detached from lived experience. Engagement with reality thus emerges as a central challenge, and perhaps even the necessary first step, for theology to become genuinely relevant.

How to Achieve Socially Relevant Theologies?

The next step is to ask how such relevance may be achieved—or, at the very least, how one might begin to move toward a deeper connection with reality. We suggested that shifting from traditional positions of leadership within the theological domain toward more network-oriented roles, and from scholars confined to their "chairs" toward designers who share creativity and passion, may contribute meaningfully to this process.

The results of the survey indicate that seventy percent of respondents already perceive themselves more as scholars and designers than as leaders or strictly academic figures.

A systematic reflection on what it means to function as a networker or designer requires attention to two considerations that scholars still need to internalize. First, given the inherently hermeneutical character of theology, a double hermeneutical movement must be held in careful balance. Second, the genealogies of knowledge—both within the hermeneutical community of believers and within the scientific community—must be traced in order to understand how theological insight emerges, circulates, and develops.

Double Hermeneutical Movement: From Credibility to Relevancy

Just as the Enlightenment posed a significant challenge to the theology of credibility—one grounded in rigor and in the capacity to respond to objections through the logical structure of its discourse in dialogue with the other sciences (the first hermeneutical movement)—so today the recovery of theology as a dialogical encounter "face to face" (corresponding to the second hermeneutical movement) will assume increasing relevance.

Schleiermacher addressed the first hermeneutical problem: the relationship among the text, its context, and the reader. Dilthey, in turn, sought to establish hermeneutics as a scientific discipline by identifying a second hermeneutical problem—namely, the tension between academic credibility and scientific identity.[44] Traditional exegesis emphasized only one dimension of interpretation: the coherence between Scripture and Tradition, which served to secure the credibility of contemporary dogmas and doctrines within a scientific framework in relation to the ancient biblical texts.

It was not until Ricoeur that a second return path from the text was rediscovered—a movement from the present to the present, in which the text functions as a spoken dialogue that reconnects theology with its task of effecting transformation in the lives of believers and in humanity as a whole. While contemporary exegesis has made significant progress in understanding the biblical text, theology now faces the challenge posed by this second hermeneutical movement: the movement from the text to the reader, or to humanity itself. The methods employed in this movement must therefore be both valid and meaningful for believers and for the broader human community.

The challenge lies in the movement from the text to the lived reality of the community. Just as the sacramental sign requires both matter and spirit in order to become active and operative as grace, theology must be coherent and credible, yet also relevant to what calls for validation in praxis and concrete application. What is credible *makes sense*; what is relevant *speaks meaningfully* to the life of a particular person.

The Church is called "to announce the Good News of Christ to all, in dialogue with the different sciences in the service of an ever deeper penetration and application of the truth in personal and social life,"[45] inviting us to take the step toward the second hermeneutical movement—from text to praxis, from internal credibility to the concrete relevance of witness, wherein the questions, hopes, dreams, and concerns of the people cannot be ignored if we are to take the principle of the Incarnation seriously.

Genealogies of Knowledge

Ricoeur[46] coined the term "interpretative universe" to describe a space of confluence among theological, philosophical, and scientific forms of inquiry. This interpretative universe is oriented toward the search for meaning, where theology does more than understand or explain, and where truth is discovered through the

[44] Werner Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics. Development and Significance* (London: SCM Press, 1991), 51.

[45] Francis, *Veritatis gaudium*, 5.

[46] Paul Ricoeur, *Hermenéutica y acción. De la hermenéutica del texto a la hermenéutica de la acción* (Madrid: Prometeo Libros, 2008).

plurality of singular perspectives. Within this universe, the specific task of theology is teleological—concerned with purpose and meaning—unlike the natural sciences, whose aim is to describe how the world functions, or philosophy, which seeks to explain the nature of reality and the structure of facts.

The conception of an interpretative universe, shared by both the scientific community and the theological community of believers, neither dilutes nor dismisses the singularity of personal experiences. Rather, it seeks meaning for the many within the historical–linguistic fabric that shapes human understanding. Texts (as expressions of history) and dialogues (as expressions of the present) coexist within time, action, and word—elements that together constitute the matrix of this universe. In such a framework, discourses become modes of access to a reality open to its teleological meaning, wherein human actions acquire significance within history and in the temporal horizons of others.

From this perspective, ethics and anthropological responsibility are situated. Language is understood within the horizon of the interpretative universe as the medium through which dialogue makes possible a radical transformation of society.

For theology, the application of the second hermeneutical movement triggers processes that return the text to the interpretative universe of the tradition through the following attitudes of the researcher: empathy, historicity, linguistic awareness, attention to tradition, the fusion of horizons as continuity throughout history, and sensitivity to pre-understanding.[47] This movement confers a dialogical structure upon all reality and enables the passage from theory to praxis by breaking the dualism created by separating formulation, transmission, and transformation—a dualism that emerged when methodology was detached from both text and content.

Theologians find themselves immersed in the interpretative universe, within a plurality and diversity of singularities that do not fall into subjectivism, nihilism, or relativism because of the dynamics of hermeneutics. In other words, the objectivity and universality of an account—whether a method or a theory—provides a dialogical response characterized by a holistic openness to the major concerns of the world, without becoming totalizing.

Their aim is to maintain credibility within the scientific community, gaining relevance as this community extends beyond elitist spheres to include existential peripheries, which thus become proper *loci theologici*. Their task as meaning-makers and networkers implies that the concept of "knowledge" is understood as a network, presupposing that particular parts of the network are differentiated by others. "This differentiation is the key to the unity of all knowledge that is relational and non-hierarchical."[48] "The ontology of relations, which is

[47] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "La exégesis feminista del siglo XXI," in *La exégesis feminista del siglo XXI*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Estella: Verbo Divino, 2015), 38–43.

[48] Wozniak, "The University," 135.

deeply connected to theology and visible in its space, offers interdisciplinary methodology."[49]

Their aim to gain relevance through attitudes of creativity and imagination arising from the peripheries transforms scholars into designers of the world. Achieving this goal requires a dialogical conversion toward the world. As Pope Francis notes, *being at the margins—"going out to the periphery"—is hardly a disadvantage when engaging in this mutual learning process*.[50] In VUCA social and identitarian contexts—marked by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity—truth becomes interwoven within reality, much like in the parable of Matthew 13:30. Consequently, a shift in theological attitude emerges, analogous to the movement from asking: *Where can we find the truth?* to the more relational and hermeneutical questions: *Whom do we believe?* and: *Whose narratives should we trust?*

Critical Points

One of the survey participants emphasized the need to distinguish between a socially relevant theology and the kind of scholarship that seeks visibility in the general public or aims to exert political influence. As they put it: *"To the first I would say, 'Yes, please'; to others, such as neointegralist theology, 'No.'"* [51]

Although references to existential peripheries very explicitly underscore the theologian's focus on the margins of social power and influence, this focus does not exempt them from the responsibility to be prepared "to give reason for our faith" (1 Pet 3:15) in public settings. These reasons, however, may not always align with the diplomatic positions adopted by ecclesiastical institutions within the political arena.

Another critical voice points to the perceived contemporary need for a pragmatic or pastoral approach to theology, noting that such an approach might suggest that assuming the truth of religious beliefs is unnecessary, emphasizing instead their practical and pastoral implications. The same author underscores the risks inherent in an exclusively pragmatic orientation, arguing that it would ultimately lead to the self-dissolution of theology. When religious beliefs are considered solely in terms of their practical relevance and the question of truth is reduced to mere pragmatism, the study of religion becomes better positioned to analyze the functional aspects of religious practice than theology itself. [52]

This means that prudence and balance must be exercised in order to avoid confusing the task of gaining social relevance with mere utilitarian pragmatism, which would risk erasing the mystical and spiritual motivations—as well as the experience of God—from the horizon of the theological vocation.

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[49] Wozniak, "The University," 134.
[50] Boeve, "Recontextualising," 199.
[51] Anonymous, in *Survey "From Scholars to Designers,"* ed. Antonina Wozna, 2025.
[52] Quitterer, "Assuming True Beliefs," 186.

In sum, considering the critical points highlighted above and in reference to the metaphors of the interpretative universe and the vectors of hermeneutical movements, we can now inquire into who is involved in the transformative dynamics and in what manner this transformation unfolds—whether from scholars to designers or from leaders to networkers. The emphasis, therefore, falls on the applicability of these theoretical premises.

Attitudes of Theologians as Designers

Jaisy Joseph of Villanova University stated during the panel "*Thinking Toward a Global Catholic Intellectual Network*" at the EUARE Congress 2025 in Vienna[53] that the theological starting point should be the community being researched—specifically, the existential wounds present in the lived reality of these persons—together with the positionality of the researcher. *Ratio fundamentalis*,[54] *Ad theologiam promovendam*,[55] and *Veritatis gaudium*[56] describe theologians as those who articulate what a consistent ethic of life would mean today. The challenge, however, lies in the fact that scholars must first *undergo* the experiences they later seek to share. The prophetic mission of theologians thus begins not merely with responding to realities but with re-imagining them.

The privileged image of "standing on the mountaintop" to proclaim what is to come (Mt 17:1–2) can be understood prophetically only when it springs from mystical experience and existential closeness to the "excluded." At times, the term "excluded" refers not only to those marginalized by social structures but also to those trapped within systems that reproduce mass culture. The tension between liberation theology and the theology of the people becomes particularly evident at this juncture.

The attitudes expected of theologians who function as designers include becoming a source of inspiration—like the yeast that transforms the whole dough (Mt 13:33)—by cultivating a capacity to listen to unexpected and marginalized voices. In opposition to ideological rigidity and scientific dogmatism, a critical and prophetic voice must converge with ecumenical plurality and diversity. Theologians must also possess spiritual competencies that enable them to care for the community, struggle for justice, and nurture the emergence of new creation.

[53] Richard Wood, "Thinking Toward a Global Catholic Intellectual Network," *EUARE Congress* Vienna 2025, July 7, accessed February 5, 2026, https://secure.online-congress.it/Olc/Client/Programme/Public/Session/Euare/620690767252104030708716 7/en/Detail?SemIdSession=292.

[54] Congregation for the Clergy, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis—The Gift of the Priestly Vocation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016).

[55] Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023).

[56] Francis, *Veritatis gaudium*.

Attitudes of Theologians as Networkers

The transition from leaders to networkers entails a methodological shift toward a more capillary and organically structured understanding of what constitutes a scientific community—one that can be shared and celebrated through a synodal, interdisciplinary dialogue. Such dialogue does not evade complexity but instead requires intellectual humility. In this framework, "*relevance*" signifies contextual, performative, processual, and applied forms of theological inquiry.

Several scholars employ the metaphor of grass to illustrate the ambivalent intersection of knowledge and ignorance. Grass constitutes nearly 90% of the green surfaces that surround human life, yet it is routinely overlooked. The lesson here is that where the academic mainstream fails to look,[57] there theologians should situate themselves—not as an elitist circle of privileged experts, nor as a "patient contrast"[58] set against a corrupt society.

On the contrary, theologians must be accessible and adaptive, embodying a kind of *prosthetic theology* that is non-referential, non-andro-anthropocentric, and decolonial; theologians can, for example, learn from what disability studies demonstrate about relationality and interdependence. Such a theology remains open to the unpredictable motions of the *Ruah*,[59] allowing new forms of discernment, community, and creativity to emerge.

An example of the communitarian practice embodied in this model can be found in the above-mentioned panel at the European Academy of Religions' 2025 Conference, led by Richard Wood, where global networks of scholars and research institutions were envisioned as collaborative systems designed to enhance—rather than replace—existing structures. These networks aim to foster a more unified intellectual community of practice while serving as coherent partners for ecclesial decision-makers who will guide the Catholic Church over the next two decades.

The Catholic Church is undergoing what many proponents hope will be a transformative shift in the exercise of ecclesial authority, one grounded in fidelity to its core traditions. Critics, however, express concern that this process may lack coherence and risk diverging from foundational Catholic principles. Central to this development is the concept of "synodality," though the broader task of re-establishing credible Catholic authority in the wake of recent scandals remains essential, irrespective of the terminology employed.

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[57] Andreas Telser, "Zwischen Misfit und plant turn," *Limina*. *Grazer Theologischen Perspektiven* 6, no. 2: 159–179.

[58] Obispos de Pamplona y Tudela, Bilbao, San Sebastián y Vitoria, *El contraste paciente. Repasando la relación Iglesia-Mundo. Carta pastoral para la Cuaresma-Pascua 2025* (Donostia/San Sebastián: Idatz, 2025). https://elizagipuzkoa.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/2025_carta_pastoral_conjunta_el_contraste_paciente.pdf

[59] Sanaura Taylor, *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation* (New York: The New Press, 2017), 53.

Scholars who possess deep disciplinary expertise coupled with the capacity for transdisciplinary collaboration can play a crucial role in supporting ecclesial leaders and shaping contemporary intellectual debates. Although such contributions are possible within current institutional frameworks, they often suffer from fragmentation and insufficient coordination, which diminishes their overall impact. The envisioned path forward involves cultivating flexible, grassroots networks that enhance the effectiveness of ecclesial dialogue and strengthen the Church's capacity for discernment. In doing so, these networks aim to shape the Church's future in a more dynamic, participatory, and collaborative manner.

Conclusion and Points for Further Reflection

This chapter has sought to identify several prerequisites for sketching forms of socially relevant theology that emerge from the practice of a synodal approach—one that situates our *loci theologici* in a dynamic balance between intellectual academic activity and existential commitment or vocation. This approach is grounded in two fundamental insights.

First, a healthy critical distance toward one's own discipline must be maintained. Theology should be recognized not as an end in itself but as a pathway—a methodological means among others—toward the experience of God, in which the affective dimension is as indispensable as scientific rigor.

Second, rational inquiry must find correspondence in lived practice, as suggested by the concept of the "mysticism of daily life." Thought and life, contemplation and action, must remain mutually illuminating dimensions of the theological vocation.

This paradigmatic shift can easily generate disorientation, the displacement of certain privileges, and the need to step beyond familiar comfort zones. Such "disruptive God-talk" challenges theologians to cultivate the genuine virtue of finding "*a golden mean*" between an excess of theory and a deficiency of practice. This balance is sought by identifying authentic and theologically significant *loci theologici* arising on the horizons of personal experience and within the lives of real people at the existential peripheries.

The survey shared by fifty theologians in Europe and the Americas indicates that most scholars already function more as designers than as traditional academics, and more as networkers than as hierarchical leaders. No consensus exists—varying significantly by geographic context—on whether theology is currently socially relevant. Yet all participants agree that theology *ought* to be relevant.

The study therefore raises important questions about what social relevance actually means and how it can be distinguished from mere pragmatism or political instrumentalization, both of which risk undermining theology's innovative and synodal character. It may also serve as a point of departure for broader research into theologians' self-perception in the modern world: how they understand relevance, how they apply their methods within their specific contexts, and how they

navigate these questions within an increasingly globalized, interconnected, and interdependent world.

While the process of becoming a designer is primarily personal—rooted in an experience of the divine and the cultivation of authentic motivations—the process of becoming a networker requires an intentional openness to concrete realities and a willingness to leave the comfort zones of academic chairs and seminar rooms. An intersectional, twofold approach for enacting these processes—one accessible to theological scholars—is therefore proposed.

First, attention must be given to the double hermeneutical movement, especially to the movement of application. Exegesis has long succeeded in performing the *first* hermeneutical movement: drawing an arrow from present academic achievements back toward the ancient text, thereby gaining credibility and comprehension and establishing a meaningful connection with the past. Yet the foundations of hermeneutical science also lie in the *present* dialogue that generates meaning for real people in their contemporary contexts. This marks the challenge of the *second* hermeneutical movement—application.

Here, the first problem arises: How can theology not only make sense, but also become a genuine maker of meaning within VUCA societies?

The notion of a *hermeneutic universe* explicitly highlights the maps of exclusion, ableism, and elitism present within theological fields, and seeks to reorient them toward scientific communities—contexts in which mainstream perspectives often overlook evidence or dismiss certain groups as exceptions: migrants; victims of abuse; the discriminated; children and women; gender-marginalized individuals; the poor; trafficked and prostituted persons; people with disabilities; and communities reflected in polluted or exploited environments.

This is why the project "Doing Theology from the Existential Peripheries," launched in 2021 by the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and dedicated precisely to listening to the aforementioned groups, stands as a sign of the Spirit for our times from a theological perspective.

A second challenge then emerges: What can we learn from these experiences so that theology becomes not only a witness but also a prophetic voice within both the scientific community and the community of believers?

Finally, several attitudes necessary for enabling this shift—both personally and collectively—can be highlighted: creativity, imagination, discernment, and humility, all of which point toward a coherent ethics of life. From various perspectives, Catholic scholars often feel unheard within the institutional Church and express a need for both discernment and support. They are called not merely to validate theories but to engage actively with reality, even when this requires bringing conflict to the surface and remaining with the tension of the problem.

The Panel of the European Academy of Religion in Vienna (2025), titled: "*Thinking Toward a Global Catholic Intellectual Network*," presents several challenging roles for theologians who choose the synodal path, inviting them to become designers and network-builders as they explore key themes for further

reflection and deepening. The list begins with the need for interdisciplinarity—connecting innovative new approaches with the reaffirmation of essential truths in Catholic teaching and practice.

Theologians are tasked with addressing decision-makers regarding the organizational and cultural challenges of the contemporary world, and with informing Catholic perspectives on pressing global issues such as technology, climate change, authoritarianism, democracy, migration, gender, and sexuality. Promoting constructive patterns of dialogue and collaboration within both ecclesial culture and wider society must go hand in hand with strengthening and evolving traditions that offer spiritual grounding in an increasingly hyper-modern world.

May this conviction expressed by Emma Rees open the debate and bring this chapter to a close. To achieve epistemological balance and correct existing dissonances, postcolonial theologians would do well to aspire to Metz's vision: "*To become human is to become poor*."[60] If they are to remain credible, postcolonial theologians must collaborate with the poor, the marginalized, and the subaltern in order to recover colonial memories and to decolonize the otherwise narrowly denotative contours of postcolonial theologies. As Rees succinctly states: "Simply put, we postcolonial theologians must practice what we teach and write, offering the entire academic community an example of decolonization in our scholarly conduct."[61]

List of the Charts

Chart 1: Schematic content of the results of the continental consultation of the Project: *Doing Theology from the Existential Peripheries*, developed in 2021 within the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. Own elaboration.

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[60] Johann Baptist Metz, *Poverty of Spirit* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 10.

[61] Emma Rees, *Talking Bodies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives of Embodiment, Gender and Identity* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 11.

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Ad Theologiam Promovendam—For Whom?:

A Brief Discussion on Theology's Task in Rethinking the Role of the Academic Community

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Abstract

This chapter critically examines the contemporary task of theology within academia, focusing on its dual responsibility to its respective faith community and broader society. Tracing theology's historical and institutional entanglement with universities, it highlights enduring challenges related to authority, power dynamics, and social relevance. The cases of *Donum veritatis* (1990) and *Ad theologiam promovendam* (2023) illustrate both the limitations of hierarchical control and the promise of a synodal, contextually grounded theology that fosters dialogue, fraternity, and engagement with the lived experiences of the faithful. Ultimately, theology's relevance lies in its capacity to mediate between scholarly rigor, pastoral responsibility, and societal engagement, offering intellectual and spiritual resources across diverse communities.

Keywords: Theology; academic community; synodality; *Donum veritatis*; *Ad theologiam promovendam*.

Introduction: The Changing Role of Academia in/for Society

"Science for Society Since 1402" and "You are my Univers/city!"—these are the current adaptations of the former motto *Veritati* at the Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg. Depending on one's affiliation, similar motto revisions are easy to find across contemporary universities. As telling adaptations, they signal a significant shift in emphasis: the pursuit of truth is no longer articulated as an end in itself, but increasingly as oriented toward—and accountable to—(late) modern society. Truth is framed as relational, socially embedded, and responsive to communal needs.

Against this backdrop, the congress's exploration of "The Tasks of Theology in Europe Today" may well include the critical reconsideration of the legacy and vocation of the university within contemporary society. Theology is particularly well equipped for such a task. From its inception (*in principio*), the university as an institution has been closely intertwined with theology. Even through successive waves of secularization and structural transformation, the university has retained theological features—conceptual, institutional, and symbolic—alongside some of the tensions and ambiguities inherent in that inheritance.

In this respect, the parallel between the contemporary reorientation of academic truth-seeking toward society and the groundbreaking perspectival shift of the Catholic Church in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* of the Second Vatican Council is striking—and perhaps not coincidental. In his *Theologischer Kommentar zur Pastoralkonstitution*, Hans-Joachim Sander observes: "With *Gaudium et spes*, the locative content of truth—necessarily articulated in the pastoral plural—opens up avenues for new theological inquiries to an extent that can scarcely be described as anything other than breathtaking […]."[1] If truth is understood as possessing a "locative content," that is, as emerging within concrete historical and social contexts, then theology—and by analogy, the university—cannot conceive of its task as detached from the world it inhabits. Rather, its epistemic practices are always already situated, dialogical, and socially consequential.

Against this background, this chapter advances the thesis that engaging current challenges in academia may benefit from revisiting its theological roots, both as (1) a repository of historical experiences—many of them deeply ambivalent or problematic—and (2) as a source of alternative conceptual frameworks capable of reimagining the relationship between knowledge, truth, and society. Two contemporary challenges will be given particular attention: (1) the role of academia in and for society or community; and (2) the power dynamics inherent in the production and authorization of knowledge. The chapter concludes by raising a normative question: if the aim is to foster a culture of knowledge, to what extent can theology contribute religious and theological resources not merely for particular churches or their members, but for the broader public sphere?

Theology's Scientific Legacy

One may begin with a brief illustration of the long-standing relationship between theology and the university. A suggestive metaphor is the *lectern*, marking the

[1] Hans-Joachim Sander, "Theologischer Kommentar zur Pastoralkonstitution über die Kirche in der Welt von heute Gaudium et spes," in *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, vol. 4, ed. Peter Hünermann and Bernd J. Hilberath (Freiburg: Herder, 2005), 581–886, at 836 [trans. S.T.].

transition from the episcopal *cathedra*—the bishop's teaching chair—to the university chair. Both symbolize an authorized place of teaching and the institutionalization of truth claims within a defined community. The semantic continuity between *cathedra* and "chair" is more than linguistic; it reflects a historical genealogy in which academic authority emerged, in part, from ecclesiastical structures of doctrinal oversight.

The relatively semi-autonomous guilds (*universitates*) of teachers and students, originating in the medieval monastic and cathedral schools, were embedded within a broader framework of ecclesiastical supervision. The search for truth was never conceived as socially or institutionally neutral; rather, it was intrinsically linked to mechanisms of doctrinal control. A paradigmatic example is the papal bull *Parens scientiarum* (1231), issued by Pope Gregory IX, which granted privileges such as self-governance to the University of Paris while simultaneously consolidating papal authority over its theological teaching.[2] The centralization of theological instruction in a single school at the Sorbonne aimed to ensure closer supervision of advanced theological training, not least in order to prevent heresy. Beginning in 1233, masters were required to obtain the *facultas hic et ubique docendi* ("licence to teach here and everywhere") from the pope, thereby formalizing the link between academic qualification and ecclesial authorization. In Catholic theology, a comparable logic persists to this day in the requirement of the *nihil obstat*, at least in the German-speaking world, although its concrete implementation varies depending on the legal and institutional context of individual European universities—a particular manifestation of "catholicity," one might say. Founded in the spirit of the Enlightenment in the 1730s, the University of Goettingen was the first university in the Holy Roman Empire whose faculties were no longer subject to censorship by a theological faculty—in this particular case of Lutheran denomination.

And even though this marks a decisive step toward the gradual emancipation of scholarship from direct ecclesiastical control, the university nevertheless retained—and in some respects still retains—distinctly "theological" features. Structurally and symbolically, academia has often conceived of itself as a "temple" of truth. The scholar's vocation has been described in terms reminiscent of religious calling: a charismatic dedication to the service of truth. The academic lifestyle, especially in its early modern and nineteenth-century forms, frequently implied a devoted, even quasi-celibate mode of existence oriented toward study and research.

Institutionally, universities developed forms of autonomy and internal jurisdiction that echo ecclesiastical models. They established hierarchical structures in which the professorial chair functioned as a locus of concentrated authority—at

[2] For a preliminary survey, see Spencer E. Young, "The *Parens scientiarum* Generation: An Inside Look," in *Scholarly Community at the Early University of Paris: Theologians, Education and Society 1215–1248* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 64–101, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139381178.

times not unlike an episcopal office within a defined intellectual territory. Over time, a distinct academic ethos and habitus emerged, marked by shared rituals, symbolic capital, and disciplinary boundaries.

Shared Challenges for Both Theology and the Academic Community at Large

These structural parallels also reveal analogous vulnerabilities. Hierarchical systems—whether ecclesial or academic—are prone to abuses of power, especially where authority is personalized and insufficiently accountable. Mechanisms once designed to secure unity and coherence can foster exclusion, dependency, and institutional self-protection. The historical entanglement of theology and the university thus discloses not only shared origins but shared structural ambivalences.

Two challenges are particularly pressing for the contemporary academy. First, how can the inevitable power dynamics involved in the production and authorization of knowledge be addressed with sufficient reflexivity and accountability? Second, how can universities cultivate a productive relationship with society—communicating scientifically grounded insights that are relevant both to individual lives and to broader socio-political contexts?

While theology faces these same challenges, we must also ask whether it is still capable of offering something of value to the academy or the wider public. Julia Lis has recently formulated the following critical assessment concerning the condition of theology in the German-speaking context, a diagnosis that may well reflect the situation of theology across large parts of Europe:

> Academic theology in […] Germany, which only a few decades ago was one of the most important centers of theological scholarship worldwide, has largely become an appendage to today's humanities and social sciences. There is a desperate attempt to catch up with the discourses of these fields—belatedly trying to jump on a moving train and somehow prove its own relevance, whether by engaging with socially and publicly significant topics such as labor or ecology, or by offering a (supposedly?) original perspective on literary or artistic phenomena. Theology no longer plays a role in either public or academic life.[3]

Yet theology's precarious position may also constitute a particular strength. Few disciplines reflect as intensively on their own epistemic status and social location.

[3] Julia Lis, "Orte der Theologie heute," in *"Warum die Theologie nicht klein und hässlich zu sein braucht." Politisch-theologische Anfragen an die Zeitenwende und Rückfragen aus unserem messianischen Erbe*, ed. Kuno Füssel, Julia Lis, and Michael Ramminger (Münster: Edition ITP-Kompass, 2023), 209.

Theology remains accountable both to an ecclesial community and to the standards of academic credibility within a secular university. This double orientation, though tension-filled, fosters a sustained engagement with questions of relevance, responsibility, and the mediation between theory and practice. In this respect, theology does not merely share the challenges of the modern university; it exemplifies them in a particularly concentrated form.

With regard to its broader societal embeddedness, theology—by virtue of its long and differentiated history—is institutionally and socially more diversified than the modern university. Drawing on the French Protestant theologian Georges Casalis, one might even speak of five distinct forms of theology, each correlated with its own research context and community of reference. Theology, in this perspective, cannot be reduced to an exclusively university-based enterprise. Although Casalis presents his typology in a largely historical sequence, it is not difficult to see that—at least within Roman Catholicism—all five of these "*loci theologici*" remain operative in one form or another today:

> - Episcopal Theology (Patristic Age): In the early Church, leading theologians such as Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil of Caesarea, and Augustine of Hippo were bishops. Theology was inseparable from pastoral leadership and doctrinal responsibility within the Church. In modified form, according to Casalis, this model persisted beyond antiquity and can still be discerned—albeit outside episcopal office—in figures such as Martin Luther or Karl Barth, whose theological work remained closely tied to ecclesial concerns.
> - Monastic Theology: Emerging from the contemplative and ascetical life, monastic theology is oriented toward spiritual formation and mystical experience. Its primary horizon is not academic disputation but the transformation of life in view of prayer, community, and holiness.
> - Scholastic Theology: Scholastic theology received its distinctive profile within the medieval university. Characterized by conceptual rigour and systematic method, it pursued the assimilation, clarification, and communication of learning as an intellectual task in its own right. Its institutional locus was the faculty, and its primary community the scholarly guild.
> - Seminary Theology (since the Reformation Era): With the confessionalization of Christianity, theology increasingly assumed the form of professional training for ordained ministry. Seminary theology is oriented toward the formation of clergy and the practical demands of preaching, pastoral care, and ecclesial leadership.

> - Lay Theology (20th Century): In the twentieth century, new forms of lay theology emerged, driven by the need for the whole people of God to assume responsibility for the Church's presence in the world. Its institutional expressions include lay institutes, ecumenical centres, and various movements of theological education beyond clerical frameworks.[4]

This classification is not particularly innovative;[5] yet it remains instructive. Taken together, these five forms illustrate that theology possesses a multi-layered social existence extending well beyond the university. Its intellectual life has always been embedded in diverse communities of practice. In this respect, the typology is illuminating, for it underscores that theological knowledge—like all knowledge—has a concrete "*Sitz im Leben*," indeed different ones depending on context. If this is the case, university-based knowledge production cannot conceive of itself as socially neutral or context-free; it must reckon with the plurality of lifeworlds it implicitly or explicitly "supplies" with knowledge. Simply designating a "Third Mission" alongside research, teaching, and academic self-governance does not do justice to the depth of the present challenge.

This leads to a second major challenge: the inevitable power dynamics involved in the production and authorization of knowledge. In this regard, one might reduce the five forms of theology—at least from a sociological perspective—to two: lay theology and clerical theology. From a theological perspective, however, all the baptized participate in the common priesthood and thus share in Christ's teaching office. At the same time, Catholic doctrine maintains that the common priesthood of all the baptized and the ministerial (hierarchical) priesthood are ordered to one another, yet "differ essentially and not only in degree."[6] Such a distinction inevitably gives rise to questions concerning authority and the asymmetries of power involved in the generation, recognition, and legitimation of theological knowledge.

The situation, however, is by no means as one-sided as it might initially appear. As Georges Casalis argues, even lay theology is not immune to structural distortions. Drawing on a Marxian line of critique—"In every epoch the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas […]"[7]—he discerns the danger that ecclesial power may simply assume new social forms: "During the feudal period, bishops,

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[4] See Georges Casalis, *Correct Ideas Don't Fall from the Skies: Elements for an Inductive Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 11–14.

[5] In fact, the classification largely reproduces a passage from the Anglican theologian and later Bishop of Woolwich, John A. T. Robinson. See John A. T. Robinson, *The New Reformation* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 60–63.

[6] Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), no. 10, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

[7] Casalis, *Correct Ideas*, 16.

monks, and theologians were in charge of the laity; in the day of liberal democracies (is it still with us?), the bourgeoisie of the church has assumed the task."[8] For Casalis, this tendency can only be countered if lay theology relinquishes—or at least radically broadens—its bourgeois social footing: "'A genuinely lay theology' would therefore have its origins in the life of the people and in militant participation in the people's struggles for liberation."[9]

In this perspective, the question of power in theology cannot be resolved merely by shifting authority from clerical to lay actors. Rather, it demands a more fundamental reflection on the social location of theological discourse itself and on the concrete communities in which it is generated, contested, and authorized.

With the question of how these power dynamics are addressed within theological discourse and in theology's self-understanding of its task within the ecclesial community, two brief case studies may offer instructive insight: the Instruction *Donum veritatis*[10] (1990) and the motu proprio *Ad theologiam promovendam*[11] (2023).

Case Study I: Instruction *Donum Veritatis*. On the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian

In a commentary published in the journal *Communio*, the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger highlighted several noteworthy aspects of the often-described "notorious" Instruction *Donum veritatis*. He emphasized that the document deliberately refrained from beginning with the Magisterium, instead placing at its centre the truth of faith as a divine gift entrusted to the Church: "It will be noticeable from the structure that we did not place the Magisterium at the beginning, but rather the presentation of the truth as a gift of God to His people: The truth of faith […] has its place in the communal subject of the people of God, the Church."[12] Accordingly, the ecclesial mission of the theologian should not be construed in terms of a binary opposition between Magisterium and theology, but rather within a relational triad: "The question of the ecclesial mission of the theologian should not be viewed in the dualism of Magisterium vs. theology, but rather within a triangular relationship: the People of God as bearer of the *sensus fidei* and as the

[8] Casalis, *Correct Ideas*, 22.
[9] Casalis, *Correct Ideas*, 24.
[10] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum veritatis*. Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1990), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900524_theologian-vocation_en.html.
[11] Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html.
[12] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Zur *Instruktion über die kirchliche Berufung des Theologen*," *Communio* 19, no. 6 (November/December 1990): 563 [trans. S.T.].

common locus of all faith, the Magisterium, and theology."[13] As illustrative examples, Ratzinger points to the Marian dogma of 1854, the definition of papal infallibility in 1870, and the dogma of the Assumption in 1950, arguing that these doctrinal formulations became possible because the sense of faith had already discerned them, while theology and the Magisterium subsequently subjected them to critical examination and authoritative formulation.

At the same time, the question arises as to what occurs when the Church—or more precisely, its magisterial leadership—risks losing contact with the world it seeks to address. Ratzinger recalls the judgment of Johann Baptist Metz:

> No less a figure than Johann Baptist Metz, for example, said that the Church's anti-modernist decisions rendered the great service of preventing her from sinking into the bourgeois-liberal world. But in the details of their doctrinal content, they were later superseded, once they had fulfilled their pastoral role in their specific situation.[14]

Quite apart from the noteworthy decision to cite Metz in this context, the introduction of the criterion of "pastoral need" is particularly striking. It reflects the fundamental pastoral reorientation articulated in *Gaudium et spes*, as mentioned above. Indeed, it does so to such an extent that even unequivocal condemnations of modernity issued by a series of popes can be described by the then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as having been "later superseded" once they had fulfilled their specific pastoral function.

Yet the problem of power dynamics persists. And even though Ratzinger explicitly addresses it, it remains questionable whether his argument reaches the core of the issue. He writes:

> Where theology organizes itself according to the principle of majority and sets up a counter-magisterium that offers the faithful alternative courses of action, it fails its very nature. It elevates itself to a political factor, presents itself within structures of power, and insists on the political model of majority rule.[15]

The warning is unmistakable: theology must not simply replicate political procedures within the Church—similar cautions have also been voiced recently in the context of the Synodal Way in Germany. Yet, Ratzinger's solution seems to leave open the question of how theology is to be practiced "in close communion with the Hierarchy" (see *Veritatis gaudium*, art. 3, § 3) without itself becoming entangled in implicit structures of power. Can theology ever present itself as free from

[13] Ratzinger, "Zur *Instruktion über die kirchliche Berufung des Theologen*."
[14] Ratzinger, "Zur *Instruktion über die kirchliche Berufung des Theologen*," 564.
[15] Ratzinger, "Zur *Instruktion über die kirchliche Berufung des Theologen*," 564–565.

such structures? Or does the rejection of a "counter-magisterium" risk an indirect concentration of power within the Magisterium, which then determines what counts as pastorally necessary, for whom, and which theological—that is, scholarly—solutions are to be sought and authorized?

These questions suggest that the negotiation of authority in theology cannot be resolved by simple oppositions, but demands sustained reflection on the institutional and epistemic conditions under which theological knowledge is generated and legitimized. A constructive step toward addressing these tensions may indeed be found in the motu proprio *Ad theologiam promovendam*, to which we now turn.

Case Study II: Motu Proprio *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*

The immediate occasion for the 2023 motu proprio *Ad theologiam promovendam* (ATP) was the updating of the statutes of the Pontifical Academy of Theology. Yet the document reaches far beyond a merely administrative reform. It is best known for its striking characterization of theology as a "courageous cultural revolution" (ATP 4), echoing the vision articulated in *Laudato si'*.[16] At its core lies a significant development in the understanding of theology itself. The document "recognized the need to position theology in such a way that it can serve both the Church and the world" (ATP 2). In this perspective, "a synodal, missionary Church that 'goes forth' requires a theology that likewise 'goes forth'" (ATP 3). Theology is thus described as a "fundamentally contextual theology," marking a shift away from conceiving it primarily as a function of the Church.

Several other elements are decisive. The motu proprio assigns special significance to "popular theology," recognizing the *sensus fidelium* as a genuine theological locus and calling theology to bear a distinct "pastoral stamp." In this respect, it echoes Ratzinger. Yet the practical implications for theologians are markedly different.

Communion is no longer framed primarily as alignment with the Magisterium, but as lived fraternity within the people of God: "The theologian must personally experience fraternity and communion, serving the work of evangelization with the aim of reaching the hearts of all." Hence, "it is of great importance that spaces—including in formation—exist where theologians can live out and experience theological collegiality and fraternity" (ATP 6). Synodality thus assumes a methodological significance: theology is not only to reflect on synodality as an ecclesiological principle but to practice it concretely—through listening, dialogue, and shared discernment. Quoting a statement to the International Theological Commission (24 November 2022): "Ecclesial synodality places an additional responsibility on theologians: to carry out theology in a synodal manner, fostering

[16] Francis, *Laudato si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), no. 114, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

among themselves the capacity to listen, to engage in dialogue, to discern, and to embrace the diversity and variety of challenges and relationships" (ATP 6).

Finally, the reference to Antonio Rosmini in ATP 7—who in his own time encountered significant difficulties with the Magisterium—may be read as a symbolic gesture toward a reconfiguration of ecclesial power structures in light of synodality. From an ecclesial perspective, the challenge is to strengthen synodality not only spiritually but structurally; from a theological perspective, it is to explore more deeply its doctrinal, epistemological, and institutional implications.

Conclusion: Theology's Task—Providing Religious Resources for All

In conclusion, theology's task today is to navigate the complex interplay between authority, community, and social relevance, providing religious resources not only for the Church but for society at large. The cases of *Donum veritatis* and *Ad theologiam promovendam* illustrate both the enduring challenges of power dynamics and the promise of a synodal, contextually grounded theology that fosters dialogue, fraternity, and engagement with the lived experiences of the faithful. Ultimately, theology's strength lies in its dual accountability—to ecclesial structures and to the broader public—enabling it to mediate between scholarly rigour and practical relevance. In this chapter, an attempt has been made to show that the debates that have always accompanied theology may also serve as a valuable resource for other disciplines.

Building on this, and following the philosopher François Jullien's argument that *There Is No Such Thing as Cultural Identity*,[17] there is no fixed cultural or religious identity, not even a closed Catholic tradition. From this perspective, theology's academic task can be understood as providing *Resources of Christianity*[18] for all, advancing a program of "de-bordering" and reciprocal hospitality. In this framework, theologians can learn from those who define themselves as non-religious, discovering anew what it means to "enter into Christianity's thought."[19]

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[18] François Jullien, *Resources of Christianity*, trans. Pedro Rodriguez (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021).

[19] Jullien, *Resources of Christianity*, 4.

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RETHINKING THINKING IN THE LIGHT OF CHRISTIANITY:

AN URGENT TASK FOR TODAY

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Abstract

This chapter examines the call to "rethink thinking" within a context marked by the fragmentation of knowledge, ideological polarization, and the crisis of modern rationality. Drawing on Edgar Morin's critique of the paradigm of simplification, it argues that the necessary reform cannot be limited to methodological adjustment, but requires a paradigmatic shift in the very conditions of intelligibility. The study advances the hypothesis that this reform can find its principle of unity only within a Trinitarian horizon. In dialogue with Piero Coda's Trinitarian ontology and recent magisterial interventions, it maintains that the revelation of the Triune God offers an ontological foundation capable of embracing complexity without reducing it. Rethinking thinking thus emerges as a major theological and cultural task for our time.

Keywords: Trinitarian ontology; complex thought; Edgar Morin; Piero Coda; theological epistemology; synodality; *Veritatis gaudium*.

Introduction

Western thought, deeply shaped by its Christian matrix, now appears to be facing a critical turning point: fragmented, polarised, and often unable to offer integral responses to the challenges of a reality marked by polycrisis. In the face of what may be described as a "crisis of thinking,"[1] characterised by internal contradic-

[1] This is precisely Morin's insight: behind the multiple crises of our time, there emerges a deeper and more decisive crisis—a crisis of thinking itself. See Edgar Morin, *Réveillons-nous !* (Paris: Denoël, 2022), 41–52.

tions, ideological manipulation, and an inability to respond adequately to an increasingly complex reality, the need for intellectual renewal has become pressing. This is not a strictly theological issue, but a challenge that concerns modern society as a whole. The question thus arises: how can we rethink thinking?

Such an undertaking cannot be reduced to a mere updating of inherited categories. It requires a radical examination and critical re-evaluation of the presuppositions of modern rationality: the separation of subject and object, the analytical reduction of reality, and the inability to articulate unity and plurality in tandem. In this context, Edgar Morin's reflection on complex thought, Piero Coda's proposal of a Trinitarian ontology developed in a synodal key, and the call for cultural transformation articulated in *Veritatis gaudium* offer converging resources.

Although arising from distinct disciplinary horizons, these approaches converge around a fundamental question: the contemporary crisis calls for a displacement of the basic categories of intelligence. The issue of "rethinking thinking," formulated in the epistemological field by Edgar Morin, does not amount to a merely methodological reform; it entails a deeper inquiry into the very conditions of the intelligibility of reality.

This chapter, therefore, seeks to examine how the task of "rethinking thinking" constitutes today not only a theological challenge but also a broader epistemological demand, capable of opening a path beyond the polarisations that traverse both the Church and society.

The Paradigmatic Reform of Thinking

The question of "rethinking thinking," introduced as a call for the renewal of the categories of rationality, finds a particularly structured elaboration in the work of Edgar Morin. Throughout his extensive body of work, he argues that the contemporary cultural crisis cannot be addressed without a profound intellectual reform. What he calls into question is not scientific development as such, but the cognitive paradigm that has accompanied it: a paradigm of simplification grounded in disjunction and reduction.[2]

Disciplinary specialisation, while a condition of analytical progress, tends to isolate domains of reality and to dissociate levels of analysis—the biological from the social, the individual from the collective, the local from the global. Phenomena are examined outside their systemic context, as if their intelligibility could be exhausted by decomposition alone. Yet, according to Morin, it is impossible to know the parts adequately without relating them to the whole, nor the whole without a concrete understanding of its parts. The hologrammatic principle he proposes is not merely a suggestive metaphor, but a cognitive requirement: each element bears within itself the mark of the system to which it belongs, and the system can only be understood through the interaction of its components.[3]

[2] See Edgar Morin, *Introduction à la pensée complexe* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), 9–13 and 79–82.
[3] See Morin, *Introduction à la pensée complexe,* 100–101.

Complex thought, therefore, does not seek to abolish analysis, but to transcend it within a logic of *reliance*[4]—of connection. To connect forms of knowledge, to connect levels of reality, to connect subject and object: such is the task of a renewed rationality. Knowledge can no longer be conceived as an operation of external mastery; it requires recognition of interdependence and of the involvement of the knowing subject within the very process of knowledge.

Within this framework, dialogics[5] plays a central role. It acknowledges the copresence of terms that binary logic tends to oppose: order and disorder, autonomy and dependence, unity and plurality. Reality cannot be reduced to exclusive alternatives; it is structured by constitutive tensions. To think complexity means to maintain these tensions without eliminating them through simplification.[6]

Thus, the reform proposed by Morin goes beyond the methodological level; it entails a transformation of the intellectual paradigm itself. As he writes, "it is a reform of thinking, not programmatic but paradigmatic, which concerns our capacity to organise knowledge."[7] The issue, therefore, is not to correct partial dysfunctions in knowledge and thought, but to shift the framework within which knowledge is constituted and articulated.

If the paradigm must be displaced, the decisive question becomes that of the principle of unity that grounds all intelligibility. At this point, Trinitarian ontology ceases to be a theological supplement and becomes a structuring element of thought itself. It is within this dynamic that both the elaboration of Trinitarian ontology and the recent interventions of the magisterium find their place. The question is no longer merely how to organise knowledge, but from which fundamental horizon it can ultimately be understood.

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[4] In Morin's thought, *reliance* designates the fundamental capacity to reconnect what modern thinking has separated. It stands in opposition to the paradigm of disjunction, which isolates disciplines, levels of reality, and dimensions of human experience. To connect means to articulate the parts with the whole, to integrate different forms of knowledge, and to recognize the constitutive interdependencies of reality. *Reliance* is not merely a cognitive operation; it also has an ethical and anthropological dimension, since connecting knowledge implies connecting human beings and restoring a shared sense of meaning. It thus constitutes the core of the project of a paradigmatic reform of thinking. See Marcel Bolle De Bal, "Reliance, déliance, liance: Émergence de trois notions sociologiques," *Sociétés* 80, no. 2 (2003): 99–131, https://doi.org/10.3917/soc.080.0099.

[5] It is not an intersubjective perspective in the classical relational sense, but a structuring principle which, according to Morin, "associates two terms that are at once complementary and antagonistic," without reducing or fusing them. See Morin, *Introduction à la pensée complexe*, 99.

[6] See Morin, *Introduction à la pensée complexe*, 98–99.

[7] Edgar Morin, *La tête bien faite* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), 20.

The Trinitarian Horizon as the Ontological Foundation of the Paradigmatic Reform

A particularly significant echo of Morin's intuition can be found in the work of the Italian theologian Piero Coda, who appropriates the demand to "reform thinking" as his own. In the *Manifesto*,[8] he does not merely cite Morin's claim; he embraces its radical implications and explicitly speaks of the need to "rethink thinking."[9] However, Coda shifts the emphasis. If the reform is to be paradigmatic, it cannot be limited to a methodological restructuring of knowledge; it requires a reconfiguration of the very principle of intelligibility. In this sense, Coda does more than relay Morin's diagnosis: he extends and deepens it toward an ontological foundation.

The central proposal of the *Manifesto* is to conceive the Trinity as an "ontologically regulative concept."[10] This does not mean adding a dogmatic content to an already established philosophical framework, but recognising that the revelation of the Triune God offers a hermeneutical key capable of orienting the understanding of being itself. The event of Christ—culminating in the kenosis of the cross and the resurrection—reveals a mode of being that is not substantial self-sufficiency, but self-gift and communion. Thus, the reform of thinking entails a shift in ontological gravity: being is no longer understood from the standpoint of the autonomous subject, but from the perspective of Trinitarian agape.

Coda situates this project in continuity with Klaus Hemmerle, whose *Thesen zu einer trinitarischen Ontologie*[11] propose that Trinitarian revelation be understood not only as doctrinal content but as a "principle of thinking." Coda systematizes this intuition by showing that Trinitarian ontology simultaneously redefines the subject, the object, and the very locus of thought.[12] The reform of thinking, therefore, concerns not only content, but the structure of the act of thinking itself.

For Coda, the Trinitarian horizon carries an immediate ecclesial consequence: the synodal dimension of thinking. If being is understood from the perspective of

[8] See Piero Coda, *Manifesto* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2021), 41–56.

[9] Coda, *Manifesto*, 41.

[10] Coda, *Manifesto*, 44–46. Coda recalls that the *inventio* of the Trinitarian concept constituted a foundational moment for the interpretation of the meaning of being. The encounter between Greek philosophy and biblical revelation did not merely produce a doctrinal synthesis; it offered a regulative principle capable of unifying the understanding of God, the human person, and the world. Modernity, marked by the separation between reason and faith and by the increasing autonomization of the sciences, has gradually lost this integrative capacity. For Coda, to rethink thinking therefore means to recover and actualize the regulative power of the Trinitarian mystery within a profoundly transformed cultural context.

[11] Klaus Hemmerle, *Thesen zu einer trinitarischen Ontologie* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1976).

[12] See Coda, *Manifesto,* 50–53.

Trinitarian communion, theological reflection cannot remain monological. Following Hemmerle, Coda evokes a *Weg-Gemeinschaft*, a communal path of inquiry.[13] Synodality thus becomes the concrete locus in which the reform of thinking is tested and put into practice. It cannot be reduced to an institutional arrangement or a mode of governance. Rather, it signifies a conversion in the very way of thinking and discerning within the Church.[14] To think synodally means to move beyond unilateral logic—marked by juxtaposition or centralisation of viewpoints—and to enter into a shared process of discernment in which the ecclesial "we" becomes the living subject of the intelligence of faith.

Synodality thereby expresses a transformation of the hermeneutical framework: truth is no longer conceived as a static object to be possessed, but as a living reality in which one participates through communion. This participation is rooted in the event of Christ, who reveals God as Trinitarian agape and inscribes Christian thought within a logic of gift, reciprocity, and convergence in difference.

Thus, to rethink thinking in theology means to enter into a rationality that embraces complexity while being structured by the logic of communion and love. Where Morin diagnoses the need for a paradigmatic shift, Coda identifies its possible theological content.

Such a perspective finds explicit resonance in the recent magisterium. The calls for a "reform of thinking," for a critical and sapiential theology, and for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary engagement testify to an awareness of an epochal change that demands a displacement of intellectual frameworks. In this context, synodality is not merely a pastoral theme; it becomes the historical and institutional form of a rationality in conversion. The dialogue between the paradigmatic reform outlined by Morin and the Trinitarian ontology developed by Coda thus opens a horizon in which the magisterium can be understood not simply as providing disciplinary orientation, but as actively participating in the reconfiguration of theological thinking.

The Reform of Thinking as a Theological Task: Magisterial Reception and Institutionalisation

The question of "rethinking thinking" has also emerged, with increasing explicitness, in the recent magisterium of the Church. This development is not accidental. It is rooted in an awareness of an epochal change marked by profound anthropological, cultural, and scientific transformations that require a revision of the intellectual frameworks within which theology unfolds.

Under the pontificate of Pope Francis, this demand has taken on a progressive and coherent formulation. The issue is not merely to encourage broader dialogue

[13] Coda, *Manifesto,* 53–56.

[14] See Piero Coda, "Per una lettura ecclesiologica del 'Documento finale,'" *L'Osservatore Romano*, December 28, 2024, https://www.osservatoreromano.va/it/news/2024-12/quo-293/per-una-lettura-ecclesiologica-del-documento-finale.html.

with contemporary culture, but to question the epistemological and methodological presuppositions of theology itself. The reform being called for concerns the very way in which faith is known, interpreted, and transmitted.

Several interventions of Pope Francis address the question of "rethinking thinking," first implicitly and later explicitly, even employing the expression itself: the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis gaudium*, the Motu Proprio *Ad theologiam promovendam*, the preface to Antonio Staglianò's volume, and the address to participants in the Congress on the Future of Theology. It is therefore necessary to examine this magisterial development briefly in order to highlight its contribution to the reflection on the reform of thinking.

Veritatis Gaudium: The Call for a Cultural Revolution

The Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis gaudium* situates its appeal within the context of an "epochal change," characterised by profound anthropological and cultural transformations affecting the very conditions for understanding the faith. In response to this situation, the text seeks to "broaden the scope of reason,"[15] that is, for moving beyond the restrictive frameworks of a fragmented rationality in order to recover a synthetic and integrative capacity.

In the Proem, Pope Francis speaks of a "cultural revolution."[16] This expression clearly situates the issue beyond a mere organisational adaptation of academic institutions. The reform required is paradigmatic in nature. It entails a displacement of the hermeneutical categories through which theology understands itself and engages with the contemporary world.

The insistence on interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity does not simply aim at cooperation among disciplines, but at transforming the very mode of thinking. It seeks to overcome compartmentalisation and to integrate knowledge within a unified horizon capable of addressing the complexity of present challenges.[17] Likewise, the call to think in communion indicates that theological activity cannot be isolated from the life of the Church. Intellectual research must unfold within a dynamic of dialogue, listening, and service.[18]

Even if the explicit expression "rethinking thinking" does not appear in the document, the underlying demand corresponds precisely to this task. The issue is not to add new content or modernise curricula, but to transform the very way of thinking theologically in a world marked by fragmentation and complexity.

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[15] Francis, *Veritatis gaudium: Apostolic Constitution on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2017), no. 2, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20171208_veritatis-gaudium.html.

[16] Francis, *Veritatis gaudium*, no. 3.

[17] See Francis, *Veritatis gaudium*, no. 4.

[18] See Francis, *Veritatis gaudium*, nos. 4–5.

Ad Theologiam Promovendam: From Cultural Reform to Epistemological Renewal

The motu proprio *Ad theologiam promovendam* clearly stands in continuity with *Veritatis gaudium* and situates theology within the context of an "epochal change," affirming that this situation requires theology to "rethink its method and its ways of investigation."[19] This is not a merely technical adjustment, but a reconfiguration of the very conditions of theological knowledge. Theology is called to become a "missionary"[20] theology and a fundamentally contextual theology, capable of reading and interpreting the Gospel within the concrete conditions of human life, inspired by the Incarnation of the eternal Logos who enters into the culture, worldview, and religious tradition of a people.[21]

This orientation also implies a transdisciplinary approach, capable of using "well the new categories that are derived from other forms of thought,"[22] within "an awareness of the essential synodal and communal dimensions of doing theology."[23] Theology cannot be isolated or self-referential; it must unfold within a horizon of dialogue, listening, and shared discernment.

At the same time, the document insists on preserving the scientific character of theology while reaffirming its sapiential dimension. In this context, it states that "scientific reason must broaden its boundaries in the direction of wisdom," and that "in this way, theology is able to give something to the debate of 'rethinking thinking,' showing itself to be truly a critical knowing just as it is sapiential knowing."[24]

Here, rethinking thinking means rearticulating critique and wisdom, scientific rigour and orientation toward ultimate truth. Theological epistemology is thus called to an intellectual conversion commensurate with the epochal change underway.

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[19] Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam: Apostolic Letter Issued Motu Proprio on the Renewal of the Pontifical Academy of Theology* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), no. 3, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html.

[20] Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam*, no. 3.

[21] See Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam*, no. 4.

[22] Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam*, no. 5.

[23] Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam*, no. 6.

[24] Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam*, no. 7.

The Papal Appeal to Rethink Thinking

In continuity with these documents stands Pope Francis's preface to the volume by the President of the Pontifical Academy of Theology, Antonio Staglianò, significantly entitled *Ripensare il pensiero*[25] ("Rethinking Thinking"). Francis insists on the need for an incarnate theology. Authentic theology does not proceed from abstract academic constructions, but is born from concrete history and human suffering, becoming a spiritual wisdom capable of proclaiming liberation, accompanying humanity toward the newness of the Gospel, and transforming knowledge into a living experience of the mystery of God.[26]

In the context of the present epochal change, Francis affirms: "We need new paths and new paradigms. We need to 'rethink thinking.'"[27] Christian thinking is thus called to be rethought in light of new developments in the human sciences, scientific advances, and cultural transformations, so that theology may continue to exercise its critical and sapiential vocation in service of the Church and the world.[28]

A similar perspective appears in his address to participants in the Congress on the Future of Theology, where he formulates "a desire and an invitation": "that theology help to rethink how to think."[29] The expression is explicit. The pope immediately adds that "the first thing to do, in rethinking how to think, is to move beyond simplification."[30] He recalls that reality is complex, that challenges are multiple, and that history is marked both by beauty and by evil. When one cannot or does not wish to bear the drama of this complexity, there is a tendency to simplify. Yet "simplification mutilates reality; it gives rise to empty and unilateral thinking and it generates polarization and fragmentation. That, for example, is precisely what ideologies do."[31] This rejection of simplification clearly resonates with Morin's critique of the paradigm of simplification.

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[25] Antonio *Staglianò, Ripensare il pensiero. Lettura sul rapporto tra fede e ragione a 25 anni dalla "fides ratio*" (Rome: Marcianum Press, 2023).

[26] See Francis, "La teologia che sa di carne e di popolo," *L'Osservatore Romano*, November 3, 2023, https://www.osservatoreromano.va/it/news/2023-11/quo-252/la-teologia-che-sa-di-carne-e-di-popolo.html.

[27] Francis, "La teologia che sa di carne e di popolo."

[28] See Francis, "La teologia che sa di carne e di popolo."

[29] Francis, "Address to Participants in the International Congress on the Future of Theology Organized by the Dicastery for Culture and Education" (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/december/documents/20241209-congresso-futuro-teologia.html.

[30] Francis, "Address to Participants in the International Congress on the Future of Theology."

[31] Francis, "Address to Participants in the International Congress on the Future of Theology."

Francis then points to an "antidote" already indicated in *Veritatis gaudium*: interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity. Theology cannot be conceived as an isolated enclave. It is called to dialogue, to engage other forms of knowledge, and to integrate diverse perspectives in order to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of reality. Thus, "by helping to rethink how to think, theology will once again shine forth as it deserves, in the Church and in the various cultures, helping each and all in the pursuit of truth."[32]

The warning against reductive simplifications therefore forms part of a coherent vision: rethinking thinking means rejecting the logic of simplification and embracing complexity within a horizon of dialogue and interdisciplinary engagement.

Taken together, these interventions make it clear that the recent magisterium does not merely promote a superficial dialogue with contemporary culture nor simply defend doctrinal content in the face of ongoing transformations. It demonstrates a keen awareness of the crisis of thinking in our time and calls for a deeper intellectual conversion. The reform required concerns the very mode of thinking itself: it is epistemological and methodological. Theology is thus invited to become a place of sapiential integration of complexity, capable of articulating critical rigor and a horizon of meaning.

Conclusion

The path traced through Edgar Morin's complex thought, the Trinitarian ontology developed by Piero Coda, and the recent interventions of the magisterium allows us to grasp the magnitude of the contemporary challenge affecting our way of thinking.

Morin's reflection brings to light the necessity of a paradigmatic shift. It is not enough to correct the excesses of analytical rationality; the paradigm of simplification must be overcome in order to restore a capacity for *reliance*, capable of assuming the constitutive tensions of reality without reducing them. Yet if the reform is truly paradigmatic, it cannot remain at the level of methodological adjustment: it calls for a deeper principle of unity than that provided by systemic organization alone.

It is at this point that the Trinitarian horizon reveals its full significance. The hypothesis defended here is that the reform of thinking can find its principle of unity only within a Trinitarian horizon—not as a confessional supplement added to an otherwise autonomous rationality, but as an ontological principle capable of illuminating the very structure of being and, consequently, of thought itself. If being is understood in terms of communion, then intelligibility no longer rests on domination or reduction, but on the living articulation of difference within unity.

[32] Francis, "Address to Participants in the International Congress on the Future of Theology."

Unity becomes communion without collapsing into uniformity; plurality can be richness without dissolving into fragmentation.

The recent magisterium, in calling to "rethink thinking," to broaden reason, to overcome simplifications, and to integrate interdisciplinarity with wisdom, explicitly recognizes that the reform required is epistemological and methodological—yet, more profoundly, it presupposes an intellectual and spiritual conversion.

In a world marked by polarization and a loss of meaning, this task emerges as one of theology's major responsibilities today—not only for the Church, but for a culture seeking unity.

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DOING THEOLOGY IN A CHANGING EPOCH:

ADAPTING TO THE DECLINE OF THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

This chapter seeks to examine how we do theology in what Pope Francis describes as a "change of epoch" and how theology in Europe can retain its relevance in light of the decline of theological institutions. It seeks to do this by drawing on the ideas of Yves Congar and Charles Taylor and their notions of mystical humanism and exclusive humanism respectively, which give us a way to think about the growth of secularisation as well as the disinterest toward religion in modern society. These ideas are also echoed by Pope Francis, who speaks of the dominance of utilitarian forms of knowledge in his encyclical *Lumen fidei*. Likewise, Massimo Faggioli also highlights the dominance of the technocratic paradigm in higher education, which devalues critical thinking and sees no value in either the humanities or theology. This environment poses a number of challenges for theology. This chapter argues that in order for theology to survive and share its timeless wisdom, it must engage with the world and society in more concrete ways. To that end, this chapter draws on Karl Rahner's idea of practical theology and his argument that systematic formal theology has to be in the service of and reflect lived realities. The chapter, borrowing from Walter Benjamin's concept of the *flâneur*, also seeks to argue that this figure—someone who is totally immersed yet observant of the world around him/her—is an ideal model for the contemporary theologian, and not only gives us a model for doing theology in a changing epoch but in a context where religious institutions and support for theology have declined.

Keywords: Theological institutions; secularisation; apophatic theology; practical theology; public theology; *flâneur*.

Introduction

Pope Francis has argued that the Church is living through not simply an era of change but a "change of epoch," a diagnosis that has profound implications for theology and theological institutions alike. In this context, he has called on the Church to embrace the questions and doubts of the faithful, recognising that the everyday worries and concerns of believers possess an interpretive value for the Church. Cardinal Timothy Radcliffe, OP, likewise argues that theology must accompany people in their search rather than simply provide ready-made answers. Together, these perspectives suggest that theology must become more attentive to the lived realities, questions, and uncertainties that characterise contemporary society.

Building on these insights, this chapter argues that responding to the challenges of a changing epoch requires a renewed engagement with the apophatic tradition. By recovering this often-neglected dimension of Christian theology, theologians will be better equipped to accompany people through an age marked by doubt, uncertainty, secularisation, and the decline of theological institutions. Rather than retreating into abstraction or institutional self-preservation, theology must engage the contemporary world with intellectual humility while remaining faithful to its own tradition.

To develop this argument, the chapter draws on the thought of Yves Congar, Charles Taylor, Karl Rahner, and Walter Benjamin. Together, these thinkers provide resources for reimagining theology as a discipline that is at once intellectually rigorous, publicly engaged, and rooted in lived experience. In doing so, the chapter proposes a model of theology capable of responding constructively to the changing cultural and institutional landscape of contemporary Europe.

Doing Theology in a Changing Epoch

Pope Francis, during his meeting with the participants in the Fifth Convention of the Italian Church, noted the fact that today we are living through a change of epoch and urged Catholics to build village squares, not borders, to include those on the margins.[1] In light of these remarks, the question arises: how do we carve out a place for theology within the university and deal with the challenges academic theology faces—mainly secularisation and disinterest as well as the utilitarian drive for knowledge, which has called into question the usefulness of the humanities in general and theology in particular? The French Dominican theologian Yves Congar sees the modern age as characterised by a mystical humanism

[1] Francis, "Pastoral Visit to Florence: Meeting with the Participants in the Fifth Convention of the Italian Church (Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, November 10, 2015)," accessed January 29, 2026, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151110_firenze-convegno-chiesa-italiana.html.

that excludes and disregards the transcendent in favour of a pure and self-contained reason that views human experience as a matter of upward progress in the process, seeing no value in and disregarding the transcendent.[2]

In his book *True and False Reform in the Church*, Congar also argued that Catholicism has now found itself torn out of its self-contained framework and confronted with the questions and challenges of the modern age in a way it hadn't been before.[3] Both Congar's concept of mystical humanism and his idea that Catholicism has been torn out of its intellectual framework echo the ideas of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, who speaks of an exclusive rather than a mystical humanism.[4] Taylor defines our current age as one in which belief is one option among many, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.[5] He also points out that religion is seen by many as antiquated, mediaeval, and superstitious.[6] In such an intellectual climate, disinterest in or hostility to religion is common with many being pulled along by a secular current. The Irish poet Seamus Heaney described this phenomenon, stating that the "loss of faith occurred offstage," but acknowledged that he was still impacted and shaped by Catholic symbols and ritual.[7] Heaney also questioned to what extent the Catholic unconscious, which has defined much of the way Irish society operates and thinks, can survive in the face of growing secularisation and the child sex abuse crisis within the Church.[8] The question then becomes how theology can convey its message in an environment where the Christian framework needed to make it intelligible is not understood by the society in which it operates. As such, we are seeing a deculturation of Christianity within Europe. Heaney's comments reflect this.[9] Another factor that is impacting not just theology, but the wider humanities, is the growing utilitarian approach to knowledge, as Pope Francis notes in his encyclical *Lumen fidei*. Here, Francis laments the fact that in the modern age the only knowledge that is seen as valuable is scientific knowledge—the knowledge that makes our lives more comfortable or useful. This, for Francis, is sadly the only truth which

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[2] Gabriel Flynn, *Yves Congar's Vision of the Church in a World of Unbelief* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 48.

[3] Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 17.

[4] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 19.

[5] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

[6] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 571.

[7] Seamus Heaney, "Out of This World," in *The Poems of Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber & Faber, 2025), 779.

[8] Richard Rankin Russell, *Seamus Heaney's Regions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 359.

[9] Blandine Chelini-Pont, "France," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Europe*, ed. Grace Davie and Lucian Leuștean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 628, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198834267.013.34.

we can seem to agree on.[10] The Catholic theologian and Church historian Massimo Faggioli echoes these statements, when he argues that the technocratic paradigm which is now dominant in many universities diminishes the role of critical thinking and marginalises the humanities and theology.[11] This marginalization of theology is seen, for Faggioli, in the removal of theology from the core curriculum in many previously Catholic American universities.[12] It is also apparent from the way in which bigger universities can facilitate theology and the humanities, while smaller universities struggle to maintain not only their wider funding, but in particular their theological faculties.[13] This means that theology has become, like so much of the humanities under the technocratic paradigm, a marginalised and endangered subject. How can we do theology in such a context?

Theological Resources for a New Age

The answer may lie in the thought of the German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, who said that contemporary theology must take account of the contemporary moment, and indeed that systematic theology should be subordinated to practical and pastoral concerns and therefore practical theology should become the dominant form of theology.[14] For Rahner, the Church brings salvation to the world by communicating with it on its own terms. Therefore, it calls for the rich history and theology of the Catholic tradition to be brought into dialogue with the contemporary world in which it operates.[15] Pope Francis echoes this perspective in his message to the Congress of Theology held in Argentina, when he stated that the questions and doubts of the faithful possess a value for the Church and must be taken seriously if Christianity is truly to be incarnational in its approach.[16] Indeed, this perspective is echoed by the Dominican theologian Cardinal Timothy Radcliffe, who speaks of the need to be comfortable with doubt and accompany people where they are in their spiritual journey.[17] Michael A. Conway talks about the need for theology to become more dialogical as the few people that are engaged

[10] Francis, *Lumen fidei* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html.

[11] Massimo Faggioli, *Theology and Catholic Higher Education: Beyond Our Identity Crisis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2024), 13.

[12] Faggioli, *Theology and Catholic Higher Education*, 10.

[13] Faggioli, *Theology and Catholic Higher Education*, 12.

[14] Daniel T. Pekarske, *Abstracts of Karl Rahner's Theological Investigations 1–23*, 1st ed. (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2002), 570.

[15] Pekarske, *Abstracts of Karl Rahner's Theological Investigations*, 309.

[16] Francis, "Video Message to the International Congress of Theology Held at the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina (Buenos Aires, September 1–3, 2015)," https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150903_videomessaggio-teologia-buenos-aires.html.

[17] Timothy Radcliffe, *What Is the Point of Being a Christian?* (London: Burns & Oates, 2005), 43.

in theological study often come with searching or complicated questions that need to be addressed within the theological classroom.[18] Therefore, theology needs to pivot from a dogmatic to a dialogical perspective, not so much giving answers as providing a space to ask questions. In light of this, Catholic theology needs to recover the notion of the apophatic tradition, which speaks of the limitations of human language to capture the complexity of the divine mystery. Cultivating, as it does, acquired ignorance rather than dogmatic certainty, while still providing a framework to critically engage with and understand the world in a way that honours the complexities of the religious experience and quest, while avoiding the simple certainties that may have characterized more dogmatic forms of theology.[19] Therefore, going forward, apophaticism is a vital and necessary part of the theological tradition that needs to be brought to the fore in this age of declining institutional theology and uncertainty.

This new age of declining theological institutions also requires theology to shift its understanding of itself and models of perception, as the Jesuit theologian Michael Kirwan notes. Theology should no longer see itself or be seen as the queen of the sciences, as was the case in the Middle Ages, but should rather embrace its role as the clown of the sciences.[20] Kirwan also utilizes philosopher Walter Benjamin's parable of the dwarf. For Benjamin, the dwarf is a figure that, due to its ugliness and strangeness, needs to be kept out of sight in order to be effective. This image of the hidden, ugly, and strange dwarf proposed by Benjamin captures the status of theology today,[21] as theology needs to be hidden in order to be effective.

Theologians as *Flâneurs*

I believe, however, that a better image that represents the status of theology today, also drawn from the work of Walter Benjamin, is that of the *flâneur*—an archetypal figure which has roots in 19th-century Paris, and is most embodied by the figures of Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, who, in James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, wander around the city of Dublin taking in its beauty, charms, and everyday human wisdom. For Benjamin, the *flâneur* is both meshed in and separate from the crowd. This enables him or her to be at once an involved participant and a critical observer of their surroundings. Their observation of mundane life aids

[18] Michael A. Conway, "*Vetera novis augere*: New Tasks for Theology," in *Theology and the University*, ed. Fáinche Ryan, Dirk Ansorge, and Josef Quitterer (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024), 140–54, at 149.

[19] Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 19–20.

[20] Michael Kirwan, "'Words of Power': The Lively Dialogue between Theology and Literature," in *Theology and the University*, ed. Fáinche Ryan, Dirk Ansorge, and Josef Quitterer (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024), 155–72, at 164.

[21] Kirwan, "Words of Power," 164.

human understanding,[22] and whose careful and thoughtful pace, while considered lazy by some, is in direct opposition to the fast-paced and uncritical conduct of modern life.[23] In this way, the *flâneur* is a fitting image or archetype for the modern university theologian, who must bring their ideas from the margins to the public square, engaging in public theology, making their ideas relevant to a non-academic and, in an increasing number of cases, non-religious audience. In the process, theologians must engage critically and thoughtfully with their context, while bringing their knowledge of the Christian tradition to bear on it.[24] This echoes Pope Francis's call in *Evangelii gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*) to take on the smell of the sheep, bringing the Christian tradition from the Catholic Church into the midst of the people. Thereby bringing the theological tradition and spiritual life of Catholicism into contact with the everyday lived realities of incarnate human beings, thus honouring the call of Jesus and revitalising the Christian tradition.[25]

Conclusion

Therefore, the task of theology in the face of secularisation, technocracy, and the growing utilitarian approach to knowledge that technology brings is to not retreat from the world, but to embrace it. Not hiding in the ivory tower but stepping out from it in order to share the wisdom and insight of the Christian tradition in a way that is involved with and concerned about the problems of our modern age. Not in an attempt to make theology more attractive, but to demonstrate its eternal usefulness and beauty in all times and places, as well as demonstrate its incarnational spirit. As such, we need a theology that is much more apophatic and comfortable with doubt and uncertainty. A theology which takes more seriously practical pastoral concerns and the ways in which the tradition can respond to these challenges. As such, while we should lament and be sad at the decline of theological institutions and fight to defend the ones that remain, we should also recognise that this crisis is an opportunity to rethink theology and its place within the humanities and the public sphere more generally.

[22] Stephen B. Roberts, "Walking with Turtles and Botanising on Asphalt: Chaplain as *flâneur* as Public Theologian," *Practical Theology* 10, no. 4 (2017): 351–66, at 352, https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2017.1359913.

[23] Roberts, "Walking with Turtles and Botanising on Asphalt," 360.

[24] Roberts, "Walking with Turtles and Botanising on Asphalt," 362.

[25] Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), no. 24, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

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Part II. Church Reform, Synodality, Ministry, and Ecclesial Authority

THE NEED FOR ECCLESIAL REFORM

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Abstract

This paper will look briefly at the agenda for reform preceding Vatican II and then point to the centrality of the agenda at the Council itself. Two central images of the Church as sacrament and pilgrim people of God are noted as providing the theological basis for the renewal of the Church proposed by the Council. It will be shown that the pontificate of Pope Francis applies the insights of the Council to the global Church with its ever-increasing diversity and complexity. His articulation of the synodal nature of the Church, accompanied by a rich pneumatology, provides a new opportunity for all the members of the Church to contribute to its mission and renewal. In light of the *Final Document* of the Synod (2021–2024), four areas in particular are highlighted as priorities for ecclesial reform at this time: the preparation for and the celebration of baptism; the importance of formation for all members of the Church, including bishops; ensuring transparency, accountability and evaluation for all ecclesial activities; the need for greater attention to how leadership and governance are exercised, as well as the processes for the appointment of bishops.

Keywords: Ecclesial reform; Second Vatican Council; synodality; baptism; formation; accountability; leadership and governance; *sensus fidei*.

Introduction

In this chapter, I will first make a few general comments about the need for ecclesial reform, drawing attention to the remarks of some theological authorities who have articulated its necessity, anticipating Vatican II and then some post-conciliar commentary. Secondly, I will look at two aspects of the Church, prominent in Vatican II, namely, sacrament and pilgrim people of God, and how they, of their nature, necessitate constant renewal of the Church. Thirdly, I will speak about the significance of the Synod in identifying areas for contemporary reform. Finally, I will identify a number of specific areas of reform that may have immediate pastoral impact.

Acknowledging the Need for Ongoing Reform

The reform agenda is as old as the Church itself. Yves Congar in the Introduction to the 1950 edition of *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Église,* began by saying: "The church has always tried to reform itself."[1] Since the 1930s, however, he saw that two issues motivated the need for reform: the Church's relationship to the world and the divisions of Christendom. He sensed that the Church was not sufficiently incarnated or inculturated in the modern world; that it was too juridical and authoritarian, not embedded in many spheres of human activity and modern life.[2] Hence there was a need for evangelical conversion and reform to be more deeply and authentically Catholic.

He drew attention to the fact that it is not the essentials that have to be reformed, but their social and cultural expressions. There is the temptation, indeed resistance, to reform because these distinctions are not observed.

In an earlier century, John Henry Newman followed a similar line. He had argued that the pope, and by implication the Church as a whole, could never be a conservative. For him, a conservative means "a man who defends religion, not for religion's sake, but for the sake of its accidents and externals; and in this sense conservative a pope can never be…" He went on to say "a great Pontiff must be detached from everything save the deposit of faith…"[3]

Similarly, John XXIII in his opening speech to the Council, said:

> What is needed is that this certain and unchangeable doctrine, to which loyal submission is due, be investigated and presented in the way demanded by our times. For the deposit of faith, the truths contained in our venerable doctrine, are one thing; the fashion in which they are expressed … is another thing. … types of presentation must be introduced which are more in accord with a teaching authority which is primarily pastoral in character.[4]

The call for renewal was taken up by the Council and this was stated clearly in its Decree on Ecumenism: "In its pilgrimage on earth Christ summons the church

[1] Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church,* trans. Paul Philibert (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 19.

[2] Joseph Famerée, "True or False Reform: What are the Criteria? The Reflections of Y. Congar," *The Jurist* 71 (2011): 7, https://doi.org/10.1353/jur.2011.0025.

[3] Quoted in Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 411.

[4] John XXIII, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* (Address on the Occasion of the Solemn Opening of the Second Vatican Council, October 11, 1962), no. 15. The English translation is taken from: https://jakomonchak.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/john-xxiii-opening-speech.pdf.

to continual reformation, of which it is always in need, in so far as it is an institution of human beings here on earth."[5]

Renewal and updating were the central concern of the Council, often captured by the word "*aggiornamento*." John O'Malley has noted: "no previous council ever took the equivalent of *aggiornamento* as a leitmotif, as a broad principle rather than a rare exception, with its implication that the Church should change in certain regards to meet the times rather than the times change to meet the Church."[6] Ormond Rush has noted that *aggiornamento* could be understood "as a fresh reception (through personal and institutional reform) of 'the treasures of revelation entrusted to the Church' (DV 26) from the beginning."[7]

Yet, shortly after the Council, Karl Rahner wrote that the Council itself didn't sufficiently provide answers to the complexity of issues facing the Church. He said: "Many of the Council's statements simply express the Christian faith and that, often enough, in the light of presuppositions and horizons of understanding which cannot simply be regarded as those of today or tomorrow."[8] He could insist that the Church must continue to reform its self-understanding and the ways in which it expresses its mission in the world. In more recent times, the issue of ecclesial reform has been extensively studied by the Peter and Paul Seminar and the fruits of that research have been published in issues of *The Jurist*[9] and *Studia Canonica.*[10]

Vatican II: Two Key Images of Church Underpinning Reform

An awareness of the need for reform of the Church and its structures is present from the first moments of the Council. The first document which it approved, *The Constitution on the Liturgy*, in its opening sentence speaks of ecclesial reform as it acknowledges the need "to adapt those structures which are subject to change so as better to meet the needs of our time; to encourage whatever can contribute

[5] Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis redintegratio* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), no. 6, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html. This English translation is taken from *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, vol. 2 (London: Sheed & Ward; Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 913–14.

[6] John W. O'Malley, *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* (New York, London: Continuum, 2008), 64.

[7] Ormond Rush, *The Vision of Vatican II: Its Fundamental Principles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press Academic, 2019), 18.

[8] Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come* (London: SPCK, 1974), 13.

[9] *The Jurist* 71 (2011), nos. 1–2.

[10] See Eugene Duffy and Myriam Wijlens, "Accountability in a Synodal Church: An Introduction to the Research Project of the Peter and Paul Seminar," *Studia Canonica* 56, no. 2 (2022): 369–77. https://doi.org/10.2143/STC.56.2.3291538.

For a fuller overview of the Peter and Paul Seminar, see Myriam Wijlens, "'Peter and Paul Seminar': A Follow-up by Theologians and Canon Lawyers to the Groupe des Dombes' Publication *For the Conversion of the Churches*," *The Jurist* 64 (2004): 6–20.

to the union of all who believe in Christ; and to strengthen whatever serves to call all people into the embrace of the church."[11] In the following paragraph it gives a description of the nature of the Church which is particularly helpful in grounding the task of reform, as it points to what is unchangeable and what is reformable:

> For what marks out the church is that it is at once human and divine, visible and endowed with invisible realities, vigorously active and yet making space in its life for contemplation, present in the world and yet in pilgrimage beyond—all this, moreover, in such a way that the human within it is ordered and subordinated to the divine, and likewise the visible to the invisible.[12]

Lumen gentium (LG) develops this by saying, "the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind. She is also an instrument for the achievement of such union and unity."[13] Later it is more explicit in saying: "it is the visible sacrament of saving unity" (LG 9), or the "universal sacrament of salvation" (LG 48), a phrase repeated twice in *Ad gentes*.[14] As Ormond Rush has noted: "no one metaphor or concept the council employs can bear the burden of functioning as such a single and comprehensive hermeneutical key. Nevertheless, the notion of the church as sacrament is highly significant in the council's vision of how the church functions in fulfilment of its mission."[15]

The very nature of a sacrament demands that the reality it signifies achieves an existential depth; that it emerges into solid, tangible existence.[16] The Church as sacrament has to signify in a concrete way the saving action of Christ. This is the reason why it must be in a constant state of renewal, as it becomes convincingly

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[11] Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1963), no. 1, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html. The English translation is taken from Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, Trent to Vatican II (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 820. For a comprehensive review of the use of the word "reform" and its synonyms in the conciliar texts, see Peter De Mey, "Church Renewal and Reform in the Documents of Vatican II: History, Theology, Terminology," *The Jurist* 71, no. 2 (2011): 369–400. https://doi.org/10.1353/jur.2011.0026.

[12] *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 1, in Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2:820.

[13] Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), no. 1, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html. This English translation is taken from Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 15.

[14] Second Vatican Council, *Ad gentes* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), nos. 1 and 5, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html.

[15] Rush, *The Vision of Vatican II*, 93.

[16] Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1976), 61.

incarnate in every human culture and historical circumstance, conscious that it will only reach its perfection in the eschaton. As Richard Gaillardetz wrote of sacraments in general, they are "in the end, always created, provisional realities. They mediate God's presence, but in themselves they are always imperfect and exist in anticipation of the consummation of history. The church, at least as an historical reality, shares in this provisionality."[17]

A second conciliar image of the Church that grounds the need for reform is that of a pilgrim people.[18] The pilgrim people of God could be read as a synonym for a synodal Church. The *Final Document* of the Synodal Assembly (2024) says that the Church expresses "her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathered in assembly summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit."[19] Already, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* had noted that the Church is "present in the world and yet in pilgrimage beyond." *Lumen gentium* makes considerable use of the pilgrim nature of the Church. It says, "here on earth the church is on pilgrimage from the Lord, it is like an exile who seeks and savours the things that are above" (LG 6). Later it notes that, "it is by their wisdom and prudence that [God] directs and governs the people of the New Testament in its pilgrimage towards eternal happiness" (LG 21). This suggests an active interplay between God and human intelligence and freedom. God works through human faculties and the concrete circumstances in which people live.

The pilgrim image underpins the provisional nature of the Church. Like all pilgrims, it has to reckon with its surroundings, make the necessary adjustments, without losing sight of its ultimate goal. This image stands in contrast to that of the *societas perfecta*, one that left little room for reform.

In light of these two conciliar images, it is clear that any aspect of its external life will always stand in need of purification and renewal. Richard Lennan refers to this as a self-critical stance, which attempts to achieve a "balance between reception of the past, attention to present experience, and the enduring preparedness to engage with emerging possibilities for the Church's future."[20] The exigencies of each moment in history will elicit the need for reform with particular emphasis on specific aspects of the Church's outer elements in each instance.

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[17] Richard Gaillardetz, "The Church as Sacrament: Towards an Ecclesial Spirituality," https://gaillardetz.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/the_church_as_sacrament.pdf, 7.

[18] For a comprehensive exploration of the pilgrim theme in the conciliar documents, see André Brouillette, *The Pilgrim Paradigm: Faith in Motion* (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2021), especially Chapter 4, "The Pilgrim Church," 126–71.

[19] Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission. Final Document* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), 30, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf.

[20] Richard Lennan, *Tilling the Church: Theology for an Unfinished Project* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2022), xvii.

The Current Environment

It is not necessary here to rehearse the litany of complexities and challenges facing the Church today, existing in an unstable and fragile world of politics and economics. It is still coping with its expansion in Africa and Asia and the attendant problems of inculturation. Then, there are the various scandals of sexual abuse by Church personnel and financial scandals in the Vatican and beyond, all drawing attention to the need for reform.

Amidst all of this complexity, there are many critical voices seeking a constructive reform of structures and practices. Exactly seventy-five years ago, when Congar published his *Vraie et fausse réforme*, he spoke about the conditions in which criticisms of the Church might be sound and fruitful. These included: patience, communion with the whole Church and being faithful to the principles of Tradition as well as "genuine and frank courage ... instead of covert detractions."[21] In a similar vein, Pope Francis encouraged open and honest dialogue in the Church, in order that its missionary outreach might be more effectively carried out. In *Evangelii gaudium*, he says: "The Holy Spirit also grants the courage to proclaim the newness of the Gospel with boldness (*parrhesía*) in every time and place, even when it meets with opposition."[22] Already, in 1950, Pius XII, addressing a congress of the Catholic press in Rome, said: "The Church is a living body and it would lack an element of its life if the free expression of opinion was lacking—a lack for which both pastors and faithful would be blamed."[23]

A condition for reform, then, is that the Church must be a safe space for sincerely critical voices to be heard and for what John Courtney Murray called "civilised conversations" to be conducted. The synodal processes of the past few years have opened up such a space and given a template for how to conduct such conversations.[24] The strengthening of existing structures such as Diocesan and Parish Pastoral Councils, as well as giving greater authority to episcopal conferences and continental gatherings of bishops, could facilitate further openness in facing various ecclesial challenges at both the local and global levels.

The Council spoke of the need "to read the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel."[25] Pope Francis's motivation to extend the consultative

[21] Congar, *True and False Reform*, 35.

[22] Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), no. 259, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

[23] Quoted in Congar, *True and False Reform*, 35.

[24] *For a Synodal Church*, 84. A practical set of suggestions for such conversations may be found in Kristin Colberg and Jos Moons, eds., *The Future of Synodality: How We Move Forward from Here* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2025), esp. 139–154.

[25] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes* (GS) (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), no. 4, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. See also Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum ordinis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), no. 9,

stages of the Synod on Synodality, particularly to include all the faithful, was indicative of this desire to better read the signs of the times. It was solidly grounded in his commitment to the importance of the *sensus fidei* of the faithful,[26] but it also resonates with contemporary expectations for more democratic structures in all areas of social and political life.

The Importance of the Synod in Identifying Areas of Reform

The Catholic Church is uniquely positioned at this moment in history to be able to identify its renewal agenda, this because of the synodal listening processes. These have yielded insights into how people experienced the Church in the concrete circumstances of their lives and their expectations of it. A surprising aspect of the process was the similarity of the responses that emerged everywhere, providing suggestions as to how the Church might be more true to its nature and mission.

As the *Final Document* says: "The anointing by the Holy Spirit received at Baptism (cf. 1 *Jn* 2:20.27) enables all believers to possess an instinct for the truth of the Gospel."[27] It was this instinct for the truth that was heard during the listening sessions across the world. This exercise in discernment matured over the duration of the synodal journey, so that the *Final Document* from the Synodal Assembly of 2024 was accepted by the pope as part of his own magisterial teaching. It provides, therefore, a significant programme for current ecclesial reform. This chapter will make only a personal selection of particular reforms, drawn from the *Final Document.*

Renewal of the Understanding and Practice of Baptism

The grounding of the whole concept of a synodal Church, as presented in the *Final Document*, is baptism.[28] The *Final Document* represents the culmination of

https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_presbyterorum-ordinis_en.html; Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis redintegratio* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), no. 4, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html; Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis humanae* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), no. 15, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html.

[26] *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 119.

[27] *For a Synodal Church*, no. 22.

[28] Baptism as a noun or verb is mentioned 67 times.

a growing emphasis on baptism in the various documents preceding the final Synodal Assembly, which in turn were based on the listening processes, thus reflecting the *sensus fidei*.[29]

Early in the *Final Document* we read:

> Baptism is the foundation of Christian life. … There is nothing higher than this baptismal dignity, equally bestowed upon each person, through which we are invited to clothe ourselves with Christ and be grafted onto Him like branches of the one vine.[30]

This is in strong contrast to the elevated status given to the ordained ministry at the Council of Trent, a sentiment that lingered long in the popular imagination, one that underpinned clericalism over the centuries as well as facilitating the exclusion of women from ordination.[31] The renewed emphasis on baptism marks a strong challenge to clericalism and the tendency to view ecclesial life and leadership only in relation to those in ordained ministry and an emphasis on maleness.

Now it would seem that Catholics around the world are awakening to the foundational nature of this sacrament. It is noteworthy, too, that the liturgical documents that were promulgated after the Council emphasised the ecclesial implications of baptism even more than the conciliar documents. For example, the *General Introduction to the Rite of Baptism* states: "baptism is the sacrament by which men and women are incorporated into the Church, built into a house where God lives, in the Spirit, into a holy nation and a royal priesthood. It is a sacramental bond of unity linking all who have been signed by it."[32] The anointing of a child with chrism is accompanied by these words: "As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet and King, so may you live always as members of his body, sharing everlasting life."[33]

As Susan Wood has pointed out, the liturgy of baptism highlights significant concepts regarding the *christifideles*:

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[29] Jos Moons, "Broadening the Baptismal Foundation of a Synodal Church: A Plea for a Baptismal Ethos," *Studia Canonica* 58, no. 1 (2024): 131–52, at 133, https://doi.org/10.2143/STC.58.1.3293400.

[30] *For a Synodal Church,* 21.

[31] *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* said of the ordained priesthood: The faithful then are to be made acquainted with the exalted dignity and excellence of this sacrament in its highest degree which is the priesthood. … Impossible, therefore, to conceive a more exalted dignity, or functions more sacred." *The Catechism of the Council of Trent: Published by Command of Pope Pius the Fifth* (Dublin: Richard Coyne, 1829), 304. This popular and elevated understanding of the ordained priesthood is beautifully captured in the conversation between the Jesuit priest and the young Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

[32] *Rite of Baptism for Children*, ICEL translation (Dublin: Veritas, 1970), 7.

[33] *Rite of Baptism for Children*, no. 61.

> …a people consecrated to God and set apart by God's election; the unitary nature of the community founded on baptism; participation in the triple office of Christ as priest, prophet and king; and the universal call to holiness. The identity of this community is shared by all subsequent groupings with it, whether these groups be identified as laity, the clergy, monks or apostolic religious. Later differentiation of identities within the community do not abrogate this primary identity. For example, the sacramental character received in ordination does not replace or negate the sacramental character received in baptism.[34]

The *Instrumentum laboris* for the Synodal Assembly of 2024 highlighted the importance of baptism in grounding the *sensus fidei*, in providing the basis for ecumenical dialogues, for understanding the priesthood of the faithful and the importance of various ministries, for underpinning the concept of co-responsibility in leadership and for recognising the dignity of women in the Church. The final Synodal Assembly affirmed again the importance of baptism for communion, participation and mission.

While a rich theological understanding of baptism is taking hold in the Church, this has to be translated into a more intentional pastoral expression in local communities. Greater attention has to be given to the formation of those to be baptised, or in the case of infants to the formation of their parents or guardians. In many dioceses this is already being done. However, there is a residual understanding of the sacrament that focuses almost exclusively on the remission of original sin, without paying attention to the profound ecclesial dimensions of the sacrament. This is more easily addressed in the case of adults who follow the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults (OCIA) programmes in their parishes. However, a much more developed process needs to be put in place for the parents or guardians of children being presented for baptism. In the case of parents who are not active members of the Church and who request baptism, a naming ceremony and blessing might be offered initially until such time as they are ready for more active engagement and thus be in a position "to train them in the practice of the faith. … to bring them up to keep God's commandments as Christ taught us, by loving God and our neighbour."[35] This is not to deny baptism but to delay it until such time as there is a reasonable hope that the child will be supported in living the gift of faith.

Greater encouragement might be given to the celebration of the sacrament as part of the Sunday assembly, to express the rich ecclesial dimension of the sacrament. Parishes might put in place properly well-formed baptismal teams who

[34] Susan Wood, "*Christifideles* within a Baptismal Ecclesiology: Reframing the Question of Participation in Leadership and Mission," *Studia Canonica* 58, no. 1 (2024): 79–101, at 85, https://doi.org/10.2143/STC.58.1.3293398.

[35] *Rite of Baptism for Children*, no. 39.

would work with those preparing for baptism and continue to maintain contact with them until their initiation has been completed with the reception of Confirmation and Holy Communion. Thus, the unity of the sacraments of initiation would be honoured and the responsibility of the whole community for Christian formation be given proper expression.

Formation

As the *Final Document* says: "All the Baptised need this formation in witness, mission, holiness and service, which emphasises co-responsibility."[36] Ecclesial reform has ultimately to be hinged on processes of formation, both initial and ongoing, for all involved in the mission of the Church, from bishops down to those just being initiated, as the Synod acknowledged. "A 'thirst for formation' persists throughout the reports from around the world because formation is widely understood as critical to advancing many aspects of the Church's life."[37]

Formation for Bishops

One could give various examples of the need for formation that would greatly contribute to the reform of the Church. One might begin by noting the need for a better formation for bishops in their ministry. The growing complexity of leadership and management roles today can no longer be presumed to be acquired by the grace of office. For example, bishops might be provided with a mentoring system in the first years of their ministry. A more experienced bishop or an active retired bishop might act as a mentor, sharing the wisdom gained from his experiences, providing a safe place for the new bishop to explore his own pastoral leadership and management issues. Some Anglican bishops have such a system in place. Also, in the course of his ministry, the bishop might avail of regular refresher courses to enhance his ministerial roles and thus model best practice for his clergy and others in ministry.

Seminary Formation

Further reform is needed in the area of formation of future presbyters. According to the *Synthesis Report* from the First Session of the Synodal Assembly (2023): "The request has been widely expressed at this Assembly that seminaries and other programmes of priestly formation remain connected to the daily life of the

[36] *Rite of Baptism for Children*, no. 80.
[37] Colberg and Moons, *The Future of Synodality*, 102.

community."[38] The Tridentine model of seminary formation has for the most part outlived its relevance for modern times. It is based on a monastic model of living in an all-male environment and therefore not appropriate to a life which will have to be more self-directed amidst a very diverse community. Women have to be much better represented in the whole formation process.

The teaching of theology within seminaries, and other places of ministerial formation, needs to be restructured. As Michael Conway has proposed:

> The classroom can no longer function in the mode of descent alone but now requires a new type of interaction that encourages, enables and actively seeks to promote the ascending dynamic. It needs to be a place where the students find their own voices, where they can learn to express, and in this way, come to appropriate the material being explored, and learn to assess critically the diversity of material that is available to them and which they research according to their own interests, the programme being followed, and the ends to which they aspire.[39]

Students need to see more clearly how the content of their courses informs their pastoral practice and to develop the skills to present the faith in accessible terms to their contemporaries. The socialisation experience of younger people today means that their experience of authority is quite limited and consequently the very structure of a seminary environment is proving challenging to them. Some come with fixed pious practices that are not always consistent with a mature liturgical outlook and when these are questioned the reaction can be quite negative. The closed environment of a seminary, especially its formal liturgical life, can sometimes reinforce rigidity and at the same time make it difficult to facilitate a more mature attitude to prayer and liturgy.

The question has also to be asked if large institutions to house staff and students are necessary and affordable.[40] Might not the resources expended on these resi-

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[38] Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *First Session (4–29 October 2023) Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission* (Vatican City: General Secretariat of the Synod, 2023), no. 11(e), https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf.

[39] Michael Conway, "Theology Going Somewhere and Nowhere," *The Furrow* 67 (2015): 383. See also Michael Conway, "'I Put My Mouth': Teaching from Technology to Theology," *The Furrow* 73 (2022): 67–78.

[40] In 2017 David Oakley stated that: "The fees in UK seminaries are around £25k per annum. Over a 6-year programme, it therefore costs about £150k to form a man for the priesthood. This figure increases if we take into account the costs of personal grants to seminarians and the calculation to a diocese for those who leave the formation programme." One can factor in a substantial increase in the meantime. See David Oakley, "Seminary Education and Formation: The Challenges and Some Ideas about Future Developments,"

dential institutions be better deployed to finance others being prepared for ecclesial ministries? There is a growing need to form a greater cohort of lay theologians who will be a resource for the Church into the future, rather than lamenting the decline in ordained priests and religious who previously met this need. The Synod clearly spelt out how it envisaged all formation being delivered. It must be:

> integral, ongoing and shared … in which men and women, laity, consecrated persons, ordained ministers and candidates for ordained ministry participate together, thus enabling them to grow together in knowledge and mutual esteem and in the ability to collaborate.[41]

A very specific demand of the Synod is the need to form people with a real capacity for discernment so that they will be better able to contribute to the *sensus fidei*, to better serve in instituted and other ministries, and to be better equipped to engage with the digital world.

Appreciation for the Contribution of Theologians

In *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis expressed his appreciation for theologians in the Church.[42] The synodal process, especially at the international level, gave clear examples of how the distinctive magisterium of bishops and theologians can be more creatively and effectively connected. These worked closely during Vatican II, providing the rich theological basis for continuing ecclesial renewal. This cooperation between bishops and theologians modelled a reform that needs to happen more consistently between individual bishops and conferences of bishops and their theologians. For example, in the crises around the abuse scandals, bishops have appeared more willing to consult civil and canon lawyers, financial experts, and public relations consultants than their theologians. Consequently, there is a danger that legal and financial pressures can compromise more fundamental Christian principles if sound theological insights are not understood and followed. In light of the Synodal processes, theologians, too, might explore how they can attend more to the faith experiences of people in their local Churches, so as to better understand and then articulate the *sensus fidelium*.

International Studies in Catholic Education 9, no. 2 (2017): 234, https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2017.1360613.

[41] *For a Synodal Church*, 143.

[42] "The Church, in her commitment to evangelization, appreciates and encourages the charism of theologians and their scholarly efforts to advance dialogue with the world of cultures and sciences." *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 133.

Transparency, Accountability and Evaluation

The third part of the *Final Document* identifies three practices that are intimately connected to the reform of leadership and governance: ecclesial discernment, decision-making processes, and a culture of transparency, accountability and evaluation.[43] The inclusion of transparency, accountability and evaluation is something recent in a magisterial document. Demands for transparency and accountability have been surfacing strongly in the Church in light of the handling of the sexual abuse crisis. For example, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Australia recommended that:

> The Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference should conduct a national review of the governance and management structures of dioceses and parishes, including in relation to issues of transparency, accountability, consultation and the participation of lay men and women. This review should draw from the approaches to governance of Catholic health, community services and education agencies.[44]

In his *Letter to the People of God* (2018), Pope Francis acknowledged the need for accountability and pledged to address the issue:

> I am conscious of the effort and work being carried out in various parts of the world to come up with the necessary means to ensure the safety and protection of the integrity of children and of vulnerable adults, as well as implementing zero tolerance and ways of making all those who perpetrate or cover up these crimes accountable. We have delayed in applying these actions and sanctions that are so necessary ...[45]

He followed on this agenda in 2019 by convoking a four-day meeting of presidents of episcopal conferences in Rome, concerning the protection of minors in the Church. The meeting addressed issues of responsibility, accountability and transparency.[46]

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[43] *For a Synodal Church*, 80.

[44] Recommendation 16.7. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report*, vol. 16, *Religious Institutions* (Barton, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia, 2017), https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/religious-institutions.

[45] Francis, *Letter to the People of God* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180820_lettera-popolo-didio.html.

[46] For a fuller account of this see Myriam Wijlens, "Synodality implies Accountability: Accountability Requires a Synodal Church," *Studia Canonica* 56, no. 2 (2022): 413,

Calls for transparency and accountability are a constant today in the world of public service, governance and administration. However, in an ecclesial context these are also inspired by and grounded in "evangelical criteria," in order to be authentic. As the *Final Document* notes, accountability is linked "to words such as truth, loyalty, clarity, honesty, integrity, consistency, rejection of obscurity, hypocrisy and ambiguity, and absence of ulterior motives."[47]

The word "accountability" may be a novum in theological discourse, but as the statement from the *Final Document* indicates, the meaning is not alien to how the Church's members might be expected to behave. In addition, contemporary management literature helps us to refine its applications in the context of leadership and governance. "Accountability mechanisms are a set of formal, prearranged encounters where the accountable person's performance is reviewed and assessed by an 'external' person or panel."[48]

It is well recognised that there is an almost inbuilt resistance in large organisations to being accountable and the Church is no exception. As has been observed elsewhere, even where best practice has been identified and recommended:

> One could speak of an "Implementation Deficit Disorder" (IDD). The symptoms of this disorder present with a deeply embedded impulse to: rationalise, deny, obfuscate and otherwise dismiss evidence of failure and the need to change;
> The main "carriers" of IDD are senior office-holders who have reached the top of their respective institutions, perhaps because they were competent, but much more important, because they would be unlikely to question the prevailing culture. Loyalty is their governing, core value.[49]

This list of excuses demands that when they are invoked, they are honestly unmasked and those appealing to them called to acknowledge them for what they are. This, too, would be an honest exercise in transparency and accountability. To achieve that level of honesty calls for a culture change, a conversion of minds and hearts, which will have to happen at both the individual and institutional levels.

https://doi.org/10.2143/STC.56.2.3291541. This whole volume is devoted to the question of accountability in the Church and is a project of the Peter and Paul Seminar.

[47] *For a Synodal Church*, 96.

[48] Eugene Duffy and Eddie Molloy, "Developing a Culture of Accountability in the Church: Learning from Other Organisations," *Studia Canonica* 56, no. 2 (2022): 549, https://doi.org/10.2143/STC.56.2.3291547.

[49] Duffy and Molloy, "Developing a Culture of Accountability in the Church," 556–57.

Leadership and Governance

When we mention ecclesial reform, most people will immediately think of issues of governance and leadership. There is a vast literature on leadership in recent decades. Some even speak of the end of leadership.[50] Contemporary Western culture, at least, appears to diminish the leader and to enhance the power of followers. As Jack Barentsen has observed, this shift has been driven by grassroots democracy, follower empowerment and wider civil and political participation.[51] These trends in turn are fueled by better-educated populations that are increasingly mobile and connected more immediately through modern technologies and social media. This results in less respect for traditional institutions and wisdom so that people are less likely to acquiesce in their acceptance of old powers, and the Church is not immune. Therefore, it is inevitable that the wider societal approaches to leadership will impact the life of the Church.

In the responses to the listening processes worldwide, on the one hand, there was an appreciation for the ministry of individual bishops and clergy, while on the other, there was a strong voice of criticism with regard to how that leadership was often misused. Issues that featured included authoritarianism, clericalism and the absence of women and young people from significant leadership roles and decision-making, the poor quality of communications within the Church and the lack of significant engagement with the digital world.

Among significant issues from the leadership theme is the appointment of bishops. The Synodal Assembly desired that the People of God have a greater voice in choosing bishops.[52] Pope Francis established a working-party to investigate this issue and to make a report. This has been an ongoing issue since the Council and little seems to have changed in the meantime. If anything, the appointment process appears to remain very centralized and with an overreliance on the recommendations of existing bishops, with little input from the whole People of God. One has to acknowledge that Pope Francis did add two religious sisters and a laywoman to the Dicastery for Bishops.

Despite some little progress, if one checks the USCCB website, it has a section on how bishops are appointed. It is very clear that the overwhelming weight in recommending candidates lies with other bishops rather than with the wider

[50] For example, Barbara Kellerman, *The End of Leadership* (New York, NY: HarperBusiness, 2012); Mosés Naím, *The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being in Charge Isn't What It Used to Be* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2014).

[51] Jack Barentsen, "The End of Authority—and Its Legitimate Future: A Theological Assessment," in *The End of Leadership? Leadership and Authority at Crossroads*, ed. Jack Barentsen, Steven van den Heuvel, and Peirong Lin (Leuven; Paris; Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2017), 5.

[52] *For a Synodal Church*, 70.

membership of the Church.[53] This is in stark contrast to how appointments were made as recently as the mid-twentieth century, when the vote of the diocesan clergy was much more heavily weighted. Fifty years ago, 17 of the 26 Irish dioceses had one of its own priests as bishop; today only one is in that situation. Any suggestion that a diocese is better governed by someone from outside its own presbyterate has yet to be proven. The current practice indicates a growing centralization of the appointment process and, in many situations, it is the result of a form of episcopal patronage, as demonstrated by Stephen Bullivant, in the aftermath of the McCarrick scandals.[54]

If a more open and transparent approach to the appointment process were adopted, it would show greater regard for the theological integrity of the local Church and may establish a better working relationship between the bishop, the priests and the other members of the diocese. A more open consultation among the faithful of a diocese would be a reception of the ancient principle of Leo the Great, "The one who is to be head over all should be elected by all."[55] Local participation in the selection process would honour the value of the *sensus fidelium*; put into practice the principle of subsidiarity in the Church; and give expression to the "sound decentralisation" called for in *Evangelii gaudium.* It would allow for variations in how the processes might be modified for various regions, thus witnessing to diversity in unity. A more open active role for the whole people of God in a diocese would make the selection process more transparent and those making recommendations more accountable for the reasons behind their choices. The role of the metropolitan could be given greater prominence, thus facilitating the communion of local Churches, as was envisaged by several Councils in the history of the Church, e.g., Nicaea and Lateran IV. None of this need compromise the role of the pope in the appointment process; he can still retain the right to approve and confirm the nomination or not.[56]

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[53] General Secretariat, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Appointing Bishops," https://www.usccb.org/offices/general-secretariat/appointing-bishops.

[54] Stephen Bullivant and Giovanni Radhitio Putra Sadewo, "Power, Preferment, and Patronage: Catholic Bishops, Social Networks, and the Affair(s) of Ex-Cardinal McCarrick," https://research.stmarys.ac.uk/id/eprint/4193/.

[55] See, Joseph F. O'Callaghan, "Why Not Elect Our Bishops?" https://www.churchauthority.org/resources2/ocallaghan.asp#: See also Joseph F. O'Callaghan, *Electing Our Bishops: How the Catholic Church Should Choose Its Leaders* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

[56] For a thorough exploration of history and canonical dimensions of this issue see, John Huels and Richard R. Gaillardetz, "The Selection of Bishops: Exploring Canonical Alternatives," https://gaillardetz.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/election_of_bishops.pdf. Thomas Reese has noted the lack of transparency in how bishops are held accountable and in the reporting of that process. See Thomas Reese, "Judging and Firing Bishops and Due Process in the Church," *National Catholic Reporter*, June 21, 2018, https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/faith-and-justice/judging-and-firing-bishops-and-due-process-church

Conclusion

The Synodal processes of the past four years have given new vitality to the reform agenda, in continuity with Vatican II and, indeed with the history of the Church. Furthermore, the Church as sacrament and pilgrim people of God has always to remain in a constant state of renewal to be faithful to its essential mission. The *Final Document* and the *Synthesis Report* (2023) have provided a comprehensive agenda of reform for the Church over the coming years, which will be evaluated by the Ecclesial Assembly in 2028. In the meantime, the success of this work will depend on continuing conversion on the part of all the Church's membership, not least its leadership. As the *Final Document* indicated, that conversion happens through the nurturing and development of relationships, where personal priorities are redirected and we learn once more from the Gospel that this is not a mere issue of strategy but the means through which the Father has revealed himself through Jesus and the Spirit.[57]

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[57] *For a Synodal Church*, 50.

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THE CHURCH OF POPE FRANCIS AS A WATCHMAN

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Abstract

This paper examines the image of the watchman as a hermeneutical key to Pope Francis's ecclesiological vision. Rooted in the missionary perspective of *Evangelii gaudium*, this figure portrays a Church called to discern the signs of the times, to denounce structures that threaten human dignity and to heal the wounds of the world through mercy. The study traces the development of this vision across Francis' four major encyclicals, namely *Lumen fidei*, *Laudato si'*, *Fratelli tutti* and *Dilexit nos*. These texts reveal a progressive articulation of ecclesial vigilance, from the safeguarding of faith to the care of creation, the bonds of fraternity and the witness to saving love. At the same time, this vigilance is directed inward, requiring the Church to embody what it proclaims. The watchman thus emerges as a distinctive paradigm of Francis's ecclesiology, expressing a form of ecclesial presence that holds together fidelity to the faith with an attentive engagement in history.

Keywords: Pope Francis; ecclesiology; Church as watchman; *Evangelii gaudium*; *Lumen fidei*; *Laudato si'*; *Fratelli tutti*; *Dilexit nos*.

Introduction

A renewed ecclesiological vision lies at the heart of Francis's pontificate. This vision is deeply rooted in the Gospel and is oriented towards a Church engaged with the world.[1] It doesn't mark a doctrinal rupture, but a significant shift for the Church to become a living presence within the history of the world. This trajectory begins in *Evangelii gaudium* (EG), where the image of the Church as a watchman emerges as a key metaphor for understanding Francis's ecclesial project.

[1] André Luiz Boccato de Almeida, Julian Carlos de Camargo, and Lupeke Nicholaus Prosper, "*Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Evangelii Gaudium* in Question: A Theological Reflection on the Challenges to Evangelization," *Revista Encontros Teológicos* 40, no. 2 (2025): 555–59, https://doi.org/10.46525/ret.v40i2.1966.

In the biblical tradition,[2] the watchman is the one who watches and warns as well as a prophetic figure who discerns the signs of the times and guides the people. Pope Francis reappropriates this image in *Evangelii gaudium*, outlining a Church which "goes forth," "a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice."[3]

This outward movement is translated into three missionary positions of the Church.[4] The first being evangelical discernment (EG 50–51).[5] The Church is called to read the "signs of the times."[6] Pope Francis speaks of a "welcoming Church" that recognizes the action of the Spirit in history.[7] The second is social prophecy (EG 53), where the Church as watchman acts as a prophetic voice that denounces those structures that oppress humanity. Francis in fact warns against an "*economia dell'esclusione e della iniquità*."[8] The third position is of operative mercy.[9] The Church Francis envisions is a "field hospital,"[10] tending to wounds before passing judgment (EG 67).[11]

In summary, *Evangelii gaudium* lays the solid foundations of Pope Francis's pontificate.[12] It is the expression of a genuine ecclesiological vision. As Roberto Repole wrote, Francis articulates "*il sogno di una Chiesa evangelica*,"[13] which

[2] See 2 Sam 18:24–27; 2 Ki 9:17–20; Eze 3:17 and Hos 9:8.

[3] Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), no. 24, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

[4] This approach concerns not only pastoral care, but also the way theology is practised. Reflecting on Pope Francis's fundamental theology, Michelina Tenace observes that "la teologia è chiamata a compiere un movimento evangelico che va dal centro alla periferia e dalla periferia al centro, secondo la logica di Dio" Michelina Tenace, *Dal chiodo alla chiave. La teologia fondamentale di papa Francesco* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2017), 3. In this sense, Francis proposes a theology that is not self-contained, but acts as a living mediation between faith and history. Tenace summarises this perspective by describing theology not as "un chiodo che chiude," but as "una chiave che apre" (*ibidem*, 6).

[5] See also Piero Coda, *"La Chiesa è il Vangelo." Alle sorgenti della teologia di papa Francesco* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2017), 25–29.

[6] See Agustín Podestá, "El magisterio social del Papa Francisco: un legado en ecología integral, fraternidad y sinodalidad, para la ética social," *Journal of Moral Theology* 14, no. 2 (2025): 145–47, https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.146537.

[7] Boccato de Almeida, de Camargo and Prosper, "*Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Evangelii Gaudium* in Question," 553–55.

[8] Andrea Tornielli and Giacomo Galeazzi, *Papa Francesco. Questa economia uccide* (Milano: Piemme, 2015), 5.

[9] Coda, "*La Chiesa è il Vangelo*," 93–94 and 110–14.

[10] Francisco López Armas, "La Iglesia que soñó el Papa Francisco," *Almagaren* 75 (Junio 2025): 23–25.

[11] See also Juan Carlos Scannone, *Il Vangelo della Misericordia nello spirito di discernimento. L'etica sociale di papa* Francesco (Città del Vaticano: LEV, 2017), 27–46.

[12] Podestá, "El magisterio social del Papa Francisco," 143.

[13] Roberto Repole, *Il sogno di una Chiesa evangelica* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2017), 15.

can be understood only in terms of the mission it has received from the Gospel; a structurally extroverted Church that finds itself in the movement of missionary outreach.[14] This chapter proposes to explore how the image of the watchman functions as a hermeneutical key to understanding the Church envisioned by Francis. Through an analysis of his encyclicals, it aims to show how this figure permeates in the Church as vigilance to faith (in *Lumen fidei*), as vigilance over creation (in *Laudato si'*), as vigilance over fraternity (in *Fratelli tutti*) and as vigilance over saving love (in *Dilexit nos*).

Lumen Fidei: The Vigilance of Faith

Lumen fidei (LF) is a reflection on the nature of faith in the modern world. It seeks to recover faith not as an irrational leap in the dark, but as a light that illuminates the entirety of life.[15] Far from being abstract, this faith is eschatological:[16] it arises from the Resurrection and orients human history toward a promised future. In this sense, faith is not only memory[17] of the past but hope in the present, rooted in an encounter with Christ.

At the same time *Lumen fidei* is a response to the fragmentation of modern reason as well as the privatization of belief. The encyclical criticizes attempts to reduce faith to emotion or moralism, and instead proposes a vision of faith as being personal, deeply rational, socially transformative and sustained by the ecclesial community.[18] Through faith, believers are able to see reality in its full depth and meaning.[19]

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[14] See Sheiliane Santos Lima Silva and Rafael Lopez Villasenor, "Magistério do Papa Francisco: por uma Igreja em saída," *Revista Missão & Culturas* 2 (2025): 104–08, 105–06; López Armas, "La Iglesia que soñó el Papa Francisco," 20–22.

[15] Matteo Campagnaro, "The Concept of Faith from Benedict to Francis: 10 Years After *Lumen Fidei*," *Quarterly Journal Fides et Ratio* 4, no. 56 (2023): 31, https://doi.org/10.34766/fetr.v56i4.1197.

[16] Campagnaro, "The Concept of Faith from Benedict to Francis." See also Reginald Alva, "The Importance of Christian Faith in the Light of the Teachings of the Encyclical *Lumen Fidei*," *Journal of the Nanzan Academic Society Humanities and Natural Sciences* 10 (2015): 180–82; Coda, "*La Chiesa è il Vangelo*," 91–93; Marcos Cantos Aparicio, "La fe, luz que ilumina todo el camino. En torno a la encíclica Lumen fidei del papa Francisco," *Revista de espiritualidad* 77 (2018): 409–14.

[17] See Aparicio, "La fe, luz que ilumina todo el camino," 399–400.

[18] As Gonzalo Villagrán Medina pointed out, one of the encyclical's most significant contributions is the recovery of the public dimension of faith. Ecclesial vigilance then encompasses not only doctrinal integrity, but also the ability of faith to foster relationships, culture, and structures of coexistence. Gonzalo Villagrán Medina, "*La dimensión social de la encíclica* Lumen Fidei," *Proyección* 61 (2014): 140–44. See also Aparicio, "La fe, luz que ilumina todo el camino," 401–3.

[19] Virgilio Pasqualetto, "Il credente di fronte all'enciclica *Lumen Fidei* e all'esortazione *Evangelii Gaudium* di Papa Francesco. L'accattivante Magistero di un Pastore con in mano e nel cuore il Vangelo," *Teresianum* 65 (2014): 43–44.

Through this broadened vision the image of the Church as a watchman emerges as a hermeneutical key. The Church is portrayed not only as the receiver and transmitter of faith but also its interpreter and preserver in history. This vigilance demands both custodianship and discernment: "Since faith is one, it must be professed in all its purity and integrity […]. Each period of history can find this or that point of faith easier or harder to accept: hence the need for vigilance in ensuring that the deposit of faith is passed on in its entirety and that all aspects of the profession of faith are duly emphasized."[20]

From the outset, the image of the watchman is implied in the way the Church is called to walk alongside humanity, illuminating the path with the light of Christ: "Those who believe, see; they see with a light that illumines their entire journey, for it comes from the risen Christ, the morning star which never sets" (LF 1). This means the Church must protect the light against distortion. Francis warns against the temptation to reduce faith to an individualistic experience: "Faith was thus understood either as a leap in the dark […] or as a subjective light […] but not something which could be proposed to others as an objective and shared light" (LF 3). Here the role of the Church as watchman becomes more defined. It is not only the preserver of dogma but the interpreter of meaning, called to help distinguish the true light of faith from its modern counterfeit versions. Vigilance then is an ecclesial act of discernment.

However, this vigilance must not retreat into immutable tradition for its own sake. The encyclical insists that faith is transmitted through living memory: "If we want to understand what faith is, we need to follow the route it has taken, the path trodden by believers" (LF 8).[21] The Church as watchman must be a participant in history.[22] Because of its dynamic nature, the Church has to watch over the continuity of faith precisely by allowing it to speak in every age through witness and not rigid conservation.

This balance between preservation and openness is framed in terms of hope. The Church's vigilance is rooted in the promise of what is yet to come: "This remembrance is not fixed on past events but, as the memory of a promise, it becomes capable of opening up the future" (LF 9). In this vision faith is not merely backward-looking. It anticipates the Kingdom. And so, the Church as watchman is not guarding against change,[23] but watching for God's arrival in history. This creates crucial theological tension: how can the Church remain faithful to the apostolic light while remaining open to the changes reserved for humanity? How can the Church be discerning of humanity without controlling it?

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[20] Francis, *Lumen fidei* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), no. 48, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html.

[21] See also Alva, "The Importance of Christian Faith," 174–77.

[22] Campagnaro, "The Concept of Faith from Benedict to Francis," 33.

[23] Villagrán Medina, "La dimensión social de la encíclica *Lumen Fidei*," 132.

The encyclical ultimately identifies the centre of ecclesial vigilance in the life of believers: "Faith becomes operative in the Christian on the basis of the gift received […] and enables us to become part of the Church's great pilgrimage through history" (LF 22). The Church is a watchman not because it holds power, but because it accompanies. The Church is watchful through its witnessing, faithful through its journeying and vigilant through its remembering. That vigilance keeps the light of faith burning not only for the Church's own sake, but also for the world's.[24]

Essentially, in *Lumen fidei* the Church as watchman is vigilant, both theologically and pastorally, with active and discerning faith. The Church does not watch to restrict, but to illuminate; nor to preserve the past, but to orient the future in the light of the Resurrection. In an age of spiritual fragmentation, the Church's watchful presence offers companionship rather than condemnation.[25]

Laudato Si': The Vigilance Over Creation

In *Laudato si'* (LS) Francis proposes integral ecology as the approach of Christian engagement with the world.[26] His choice has been interpreted as a true paradigm shift in social teaching.[27] Agustín Podestá stated that with *Laudato si'*, Francis "*supera la dicotomía entre ecología y justicia social, y propone una 'ecología integral' que articula el cuidado del ambiente con la defensa de la dignidad humana*."[28] The encyclical does not simply address environmental degradation as an isolated concern, but interprets it as the visible symptom of a deeper spiritual, economic and cultural disorder,[29] resulting from the breakdown in our relationship with creation, with others and ultimately with God.[30]

Francis reclaims the biblical mandate to "till and keep" the planet (Gen 2:15), reinterpreting it as a call to stewardship and reciprocity. Human beings are caregivers of creation, responsible for its preservation as a common home. At the

[24] See Villagrán Medina, "La dimensión social de la encíclica *Lumen Fidei*," 133–36.
[25] Elias Wolff and Tiago Trevisan, "A Doutrina Social no magistério de Francisco," *Encontros Teológicos* 36, no. 1 (2021): 111–12.
[26] Martín Gelabert Ballester, "A propósito de la encíclica del papa Francisco *Laudato Si'*," *Teología Espiritual* 69 (2015): 189–91.
[27] Adrián Gustavo Zarrilli, "A diez años de *Laudato si'*: impactos, desafíos y disputas en América Latina. Ten Years After *Laudato Si'*: Impacts, Challenges, and Disputes in Latin America," *Jangwa Pana* 25, no. 1 (2026): 2–4.
[28] Podestá, "El magisterio social del Papa Francisco," 149.
[29] Tomas Bontempo, "Las encíclicas del Papa Francisco en un mundo en policrisis: una narrativa emancipatoria en la política internacional," *Revista Integración y Cooperación Internacional* 42 (2026): 21, https://doi.org/10.35305/revistamici.vi42.198.
[30] Joel S. John, "Spiritual Values, Evangelical Literature, and Environmentalism: A Reading of Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'*," *Creative Saplings* 3, no. 05 (May 2024): 46–48.

heart of this vision is the interconnectedness of all life[31] and the insistence that care for the planet is inseparable from justice for the poor.[32]

The encyclical's prophetic power lies in its capacity to link ecological collapse with social and economic injustice. It denounces the "throwaway culture," criticizes the logic of unlimited growth and calls for a "bold cultural revolution" rooted in solidarity and communion.[33]

Laudato si' (LS) presents the Church as a watchman over creation. The Church's vigilance expands here to encompass the whole web of life, watching over the fragile bonds between human beings, nature, and the divine. Francis grounds this role in Scripture: "The biblical texts […] tell us to 'till and keep' the garden of the world […]. 'Keeping' means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving."[34] The shift from a custodial to an engaged vigilance is crucial. The Church can't merely observe the ecological crisis. It is called to interpret its causes, to challenge the systems that sustain it and to call for conversion.[35] The watchman is no longer standing on the wall to warn of danger. It is in the field, mourning the damage and calling people back to life.[36]

But this vigilance also implies moral clarity. The encyclical connects environmental destruction with systemic economic oppression: "Today, the analysis of environmental problems cannot be separated from the analysis of human, family, work-related and urban contexts" (LS 141). To be a watchman over creation is then to denounce economic, technological and political injustices. In this role, the Church becomes prophetic, not simply moralistic. Its vigilance is not nostalgic for a lost Eden, but hopeful for a renewed covenant between humanity and creation.

[31] Luis Miguel Ciravegna Martins da Fonseca, "Sustainability and Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015): The Role of Social Enterprises," *European Journal of Science and Theology* 12, no. 2 (2016): 54; Ivan Platovnjak, "The Ecological Spirituality in the Light of *Laudato Si'*," *Nova prisutnost* 17, no. 1 (2019): 80–81.

[32] Alexandre A. Martins, "*Laudato Si'*: Integral Ecology and Preferential Option for the Poor," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 3 (September 2018): 417–20, https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12224; Wolff and Trevisan, "A Doutrina Social no magistério de Francisco," 117–20.

[33] Luis Miguel Ciravegna Martins da Fonseca, "Sustainability and Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si'*" (2015), 21–22. See also Joshtrom Isaac Kureethadam, "Ecological Virtues in *Laudato Si'*," *Ethics in Progress* 7 (2016): 44–66, 57–60.

[34] Francis, *Laudato si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), no. 67, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

[35] Platovnjak, "The Ecological Spirituality in the Light of *Laudato Si'*," 82–86.

[36] Gelabert Ballester, "A propósito de la encíclica del papa Francisco *Laudato Si'*," 192–94.

At the same time this role challenges the Church to watch over itself.[37] Francis subtly raises the question of institutional credibility: how can the Church denounce unsustainable systems if it remains entangled in them? Vigilance must begin from within. Just as *Lumen fidei* called the Church to live the faith it proclaims, *Laudato si'* calls it to embody the sustainability, solidarity and humility that it preaches.

Francis identifies the underlying pathology: "These problems are closely linked to a throwaway culture which affects the excluded just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish" (LS 22). This diagnosis demands a restorative vigilance from the Church. The watchman must not only warn. It must heal. And this healing begins with spiritual conversion that reorients desires, reconfigures economics and rebuilds community.

In summary, in *Laudato si'* the watchman's vigilance is both environmental and ecclesial. Hence the Church, implicated in its suffering and called to announce its renewal, must watch over the planet as well as its own integrity. Like the watchman of *Lumen fidei*, it holds memory and hope together. But here the focus shifts from the light of truth to the pulse of life. It is a vigilance that listens to the cry of the planet and the cry of the poor as one and the same.[38]

Fratelli Tutti: The Vigilance Over Fraternity

In *Fratelli tutti* (FT), Francis addresses one of the deepest wounds of the contemporary world: the fracturing of human bonds.[39] Inspired by St. Francis of Assisi,[40] the encyclical develops a broad vision of universal brotherhood and social friendship as essential for the future of humanity.

Francis confronts head-on the dynamics of exclusion that define the "globalization of indifference." He denounces those systems that fragment society and

[37] "Political institutions and various other social groups are also entrusted with helping to raise people's awareness. So too is the Church. All Christian communities have an important role to play in ecological education. It is my hope that our seminaries and houses of formation will provide an education in responsible simplicity of life, in grateful contemplation of God's world, and in concern for the needs of the poor and the protection of the environment. Because the stakes are so high, we need institutions empowered to impose penalties for damage inflicted on the environment. But we also need the personal qualities of self-control and willingness to learn from one another" (LS 214). See also John, "Spiritual Values, Evangelical Literature, and Environmentalism," 49–50.

[38] Martins, "*Laudato si'*: Integral Ecology and Preferential Option for the Poor," 420–22. See also Kureethadam, "Ecological Virtues in *Laudato Si,* "' 53–54.

[39] Francisco Conesa, "*'Fratelli tutti'* y el individualismo contemporáneo," *Scripta Theologica* 53 (2021): 123–149.

[40] For the importance of St. Francis of Assisi in Pope Francis' view, see P. Coda, *"La Chiesa è il Vangelo*," 29–31.

feed xenophobia, nationalism, racism and social inequality. But rather than offering abstract moral commentary, *Fratelli tutti* proposes a culture of encounter, based on love, dignity,[41] and mutual belonging.[42]

At the core of the encyclical is the Good Samaritan, a concrete icon of fraternity that transcends ideologies and religious identity.[43] From this model Francis calls the Church and all humanity to a spirituality of closeness and compassion that shapes personal relationships and public life.

In line with *Lumen fidei* and *Laudato si'*, in *Fratelli tutti* the Church's vigilance is extended to human relationships. Here the Church is portrayed as the watchman over fraternity, attentive to the wounds of a fragmented humanity and committed to their healing.

As Francis writes, "the effort to seek God with a sincere heart […] helps us recognize one another as travelling companions, truly brothers and sisters."[44] To recognize another as a companion on the road is not a spontaneous act. It requires a watchfulness that goes against one's innate attitude of suspicion or apathy, a shared spiritual discernment belonging to the whole people of God: "The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief […] they manifest this special property by means of the whole people's supernatural discernment in matters of faith."[45]

The Church is asked not to be drawn into identity politics or self-protection, as he writes in FT 86,[46] but to see and walk alongside humanity, as highlighted in the same paragraph: "It is important that catechesis and preaching speak more directly and clearly about the social meaning of existence, the fraternal dimension of spirituality, our conviction of the inalienable dignity of each person, and our reasons for loving and accepting all our brothers and sisters" (FT 86).[47]

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[41] Wilmar Esteve Roldán Solano, "La dignidad humana en el pensamiento social del papa Francisco," *Proyección* 66 (2019): 167–88.

[42] Oreste Bazzichi, "Fratelli Tutti—un'enciclica senza frontiere," *Społeczeństwo* 153, no. 1 (2021): 12–25.

[43] Leonard Samosir and Mochamad Ziaul Haq, "*Fratelli Tutti*: Brotherhood Without Boundaries," *Jurnal Iman dan Spiritualitas* 2, no. 2 (2022): 267–68; López Armas, "La Iglesia que soñó el Papa Francisco," 29–31.

[44] Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), no. 274, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

[45] Joseph Xavier, "*Sensus Fidei* and the Magisterium of Pope Francis," *Asian Horizons* 12, no. 3 (2018): 459.

[46] "I sometimes wonder why, in light of this, it took so long for the Church unequivocally to condemn slavery and various forms of violence. Today, with our developed spirituality and theology, we have no excuses. Still, there are those who appear to feel encouraged or at least permitted by their faith to support varieties of narrow and violent nationalism, xenophobia and contempt, and even the mistreatment of those who are different" (FT 86).

[47] See also Wolff and Trevisan, "A Doutrina Social no magistério de Francisco," 112.

But this vigil cannot be distanced from reality. Like in *Laudato si'* where care for creation demands political action, so in *Fratelli tutti* fraternity must be translated into structural justice.[48] As observed by Joseph Xavier, the *sensus fidei* necessarily leads to concrete action, since "the sense of faith helps the faithful integrate the word of God more thoroughly into their life,"[49] and is not limited to intellectual assent; it actively resists "injustice, egoism, and all forms of social evil."[50] Francis makes this clear: "Many forms of injustice persist, fed by reductive anthropological visions and by a profit-based economic model […] While one part of humanity lives in opulence, another part sees its own dignity denied" (FT 22). The Church-watchman thus assumes a prophetic stance: not only denouncing injustices, but offering a counter-narrative grounded in the Gospel. From this perspective fraternity is presented as a new political paradigm. As Podestá observed, *Fratelli tutti* proposes "*la fraternidad universal y la amistad social como ejes de una nueva cultura política*,"[51] able to overcome the logic of exclusion and permanent conflict.

However, the Church's voice will ring hollow if its own structures remain hierarchical or indifferent. Here again vigilance begins from within. The Church has to become the laboratory of fraternity it seeks to promote. Ecclesial vigilance takes on a synodal form. As Xavier recalled, Pope Francis interprets the *sensus fidei* as a missionary resource of the people of God: "God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith—*sensus fidei*—which helps them to discern what is truly of God."[52] It is not to defend truth by retreating from others, rather by meeting them in shared concern for the common good: "We believers need to […] act together for the common good […]. The deeper, stronger and richer our own identity is, the more we will be capable of enriching others" (FT 282). True vigilance then does not lead to isolation, but to openness.[53] The watchman of fraternity guards not boundaries, but bridges. In a world of walls, Francis reclaims the Church's mission as that of bridge-building as a vocation, far from being simple strategy.

As in the previous encyclicals, this vigilance finally takes a concrete form: action shaped by love. Fraternity is a project of social transformation: "Charity, with its impulse to universality, is capable of building a new world […] inspiring new ways of approaching the problems of today's world" (FT 283). Here, the watchman helps the world to give birth to new economic, legal and political systems that embody the dignity for all, primarily for the poor. This task entails one's change of attitude through looking into the eyes of others.

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[48] João Décio Passos, "*Fratelli Tutti*: uma Encíclica renovadora sobre as coisas novas e urgentes," *Horizonte* 19, no. 59 (2021): 787–99; Wolff and Trevisan, "A Doutrina Social no magistério de Francisco," 115–17.

[49] Xavier, "*Sensus Fidei* and the Magisterium of Pope Francis," 460.

[50] Xavier, "*Sensus Fidei* and the Magisterium of Pope Francis," 460.

[51] Podestá, "El magisterio social del Papa Francisco," 150.

[52] Xavier, "*Sensus Fidei* and the Magisterium of Pope Francis," 462.

[53] Wolff and Trevisan, "A Doutrina Social no magistério de Francisco," 124–26.

In conclusion, in *Fratelli tutti* the watchman becomes a reconciler and guardian of human bonds. Its vigilance now encompasses not only doctrine (*Lumen fidei*) or ecology (*Laudato si'*), but the very fabric of social life. This calls for an ecclesiology of encounter, a Church attentive to the cries of the excluded, watchful over structures which dehumanize and that is bold enough to proclaim fraternity as humanity's salvation.

Dilexit Nos: The Vigilance Over Saving Love

Francis's spiritual vision culminates in *Dilexit nos* (DN). It is a meditation on God's saving love. Against the backdrop of a wounded world, the pope proclaims that only love can heal and that the Church must be the privileged place where this love is offered and experienced.

The Church is called to become an extension of Christ's saving love, as a communion of people who carry forward the love that redeems.[54] It takes concrete form in closeness to the poor and the abandoned. As in *Laudato si'* and *Fratelli tutti* the conversion begins in the heart,[55] learning to see others not as problems, but as individuals beloved by God.

In *Dilexit nos* the watchman takes on its most intimate and demanding expression: the guardianship of love itself. It's the fulfilment of the entire social itinerary of the pontificate. It "*constituye un llamado a redescubrir el corazón de Cristo como centro de la vida cristiana y principio transformador de la historia*,"[56] thus revealing the theological root of every social commitment. Francis writes: "His open heart has gone before us and waits for us, unconditionally, asking only to offer us his love and friendship. For 'he loved us first.'"[57] Here the attitude of the watchman is no longer one of discernment from a distance, but of radical nearness.[58] The Church is called to watch over the wounds of the world with the very tenderness of Christ. Vigilance becomes attentiveness to despair and silent cries: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them […] Whenever we feel that everyone ignores us […] he remains concerned for us" (DN 40).

This compassion defines the watchman's identity. It raises a pressing question: can the Church truly be the sentinel of saving love if its own face is marked by exclusion, fear or judgment? The credibility of its mission depends on its capacity

[54] Jaime Baquero, "*Dilexit nos*: una invitación a reformar cristianismos que distancian de Jesucristo," *Revista de Pensamiento y Cultura* 11 (2024): 115–16.

[55] Ignasi Fuster Camp, "La encíclica Dilexit Nos sobre el corazón de Cristo. Unas consideraciones filosóficas en torno a la verdad del corazón," *RCatT* 49, no. 2 (2024): 229–50; Eugenio Alberto Rodríguez, "Dilexit Nos: Él nos amó primero, del Papa Francisco," *Almagaren* 75 (Junio 2025): 36–37.

[56] Podestá, "El magisterio social del Papa Francisco," 153.

[57] Francis, *Dilexit nos* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), no. 1, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/20241024-enciclica-dilexit-nos.html.

[58] Baquero, "*Dilexit nos*," 120–21.

to embody what it proclaims. Francis insists that this love is a force that transforms social reality.[59] Quoting the Constitutions of the Society of the Sacred Heart, he writes: "Caught up as we are in the desires of the heart of Jesus, we want people to grow in dignity […]. Our starting point is the Gospel, with all that it demands from us of love, forgiveness and justice" (DN 150).

This is where the Church-watchman's vocation becomes fully ecclesial and prophetic. Vigilance is active solidarity, especially with the poor and the forgotten. But it is also internal fidelity: the Church must guard the authenticity of its own love. Otherwise, it risks becoming a dissonant voice in a world already sceptical of mercy.[60] Therefore, *Dilexit nos* completes the watchman's mission: no longer centred only on light (*Lumen fidei*), relationship (*Fratelli tutti*) or life (*Laudato si'*), but on the very heart of the Gospel, a saving love which is always missionary: "Just as you did it to one of the least of these […] you did it to me. […] [Jesus] now asks you to meet him there, in every one of our brothers and sisters, and especially in the poor, the despised and the abandoned members of society" (DN 213).

The Church-watchman is therefore sent out to cross them and to reveal the mercy that breaks through every form of exclusion. In *Dilexit nos* the image of the Church as watchman reaches its deepest form: the custodian of saving love, which is a gift to be given. This vigilance is hope-filled. It calls the Church to remain close to suffering and to announce salvation not with words alone, but through lives that testify to grace.

Conclusion

Through the encyclicals of Pope Francis, the image of the Church as a watchman emerges as an ecclesial figure that unites: 1) contemplation and action: in *Lumen fidei*, the watchman sees what threatens faith and what calls it forth anew; 2) discernment and proximity: in *Laudato si'*, where the watchman displays ecological conscience and ethical resistance; 3) prophecy and mercy: whilst in *Fratelli tutti* the watchman labours for peace and dialogue through the service of others, in *Dilexit nos* this journey of vigilance reaches its heart. The watchman is no longer standing on a tower but kneeling beside the broken, delivering mercy not in message-form but in active life-form.

These encyclicals present an image of the Church imbued by a willingness to be illuminated by grace and become a testimony of the next coming of the Kingdom. The watchman is not the one who holds answers, but the one who remains attentive and hopeful.

This vision poses a profound question to the Church today: can it be this kind of watchman, capable of discerning without dominating, accompanying without

[59] Rodríguez, "Dilexit Nos Él nos amó primero, del Papa Francisco," 43–45.

[60] Paulo Hamurabi Ferreira Moura, "*Dilexit nos*: um apelo ao Coração do mundo," *Coletânea* 24, no. 48 (2025): 416.

fearing, witnessing without retreating? Can it become what it proclaims, that is a Church that sees, suffers and saves not by power, but through love? If it can, then the image of the watchman will not be a figure of the past, but a prophetic form for the future.

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DOMINE QUO VADIS?

THE MEANING OF MAGISTERIUM IN AN AGE OF SYNODALITY

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Abstract

With the radical plurality of a truly World Church, as presciently proposed by Karl Rahner, now increasingly manifest, the synodal imperatives of communion, participation and mission present challenges and opportunities in equal measure for the Eurocentric heartland of a defunct Christendom and its widely discredited ecclesial apparatus. This paper suggests that renewing the vitality of Catholic faith in the Global North, and its mission of proclaiming the Gospel in multiple social, political, and scientific dimensions, demands in particular a re-thinking of the Church's magisterium, its legitimacy, and the binding force, or otherwise, of its pronouncements. The understanding of the Church as a hierarchy, teaching with an authority tantamount to infallibility, in a multiplicity of contexts of contemporary faith and morals, is no longer operative. Moreover, the vain pursuit of certainty in the interpretation and application of Gospel imperatives to the radical variability of human life and circumstances becomes increasingly problematic in a world of accelerating change and exponentially growing moral complexity.

Keywords: Magisterium; synodality; *sensus fidelium*; reception; theological dissent; Pope Francis.

The late Pope Francis, on October 26, 2024, formally incorporated the Final Report of the Synod on Synodality into the "ordinary Magisterium of the Successor of St. Peter," constituting "a form of exercise of the authentic teaching of the Bishop of Rome."[1] As synodality enters the complex reality of its implementation phase, the question arises as to whether the Church's commitment to self-transformation to a newly vibrant community of discipleship underpinned by princi-

[1] Francis, *Note to Accompany the Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/11/25/241125k.html.

ples of participation, solidarity and subsidiarity, will be successfully operationalised, or fall prey to a recrudescence of hierarchical and centralising tendencies, by turns indifferent and inimical to the vision of a synodal Church of communion, participation and mission. In this regard, much depends on the reconfiguration of our collective understanding of the source and legitimacy of the Church's teaching authority and the challenges which synodal principles present for traditional ways of thinking about it.

There are some lessons from history to be considered here. Despite Vatican II's avowal of the supernatural sense of the faith of the entire People of God as the warrant for the Church's indefectibility in belief,[2] the centralised institutional control of doctrinal definition, development, and promulgation was, if anything, intensified after the Council. In the papacy of John Paul II, a revised Code of Canon Law, an extensive and detailed Catechism of the Catholic Church and a stream of papal encyclicals, declarations, and instructions issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, contributed to what Peter Steinfels has called "a vast edifice of complicated teachings"[3] making it, if anything, more difficult to remember that, as Joseph Ratzinger once observed, "Christianity … is concerned with trust and belief in a person and not fundamentally with assent to a series of propositions."[4]

Moreover, there was a tendency in post-conciliar interpretation to recast conscience-formation as alignment to the teaching contained in ecclesial documents. The concept, advanced by Edward Vacek, of "orthocardia," the rightly-formed heart, was thus placed in contra-distinction to magisterial emphasis on specific elements of orthodoxy and orthopraxis.[5]

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 1990 Instruction *Donum veritatis* represented a major affirmation of centralised magisterial control, with its insistence that the theologian's true task is that of "presenting and illustrating the doctrine of the faith in its integrity and with full accuracy."[6] The Instruction was patronising, if not dismissive, toward the *sensus fidelium*, asserting that "the sense

[2] Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), no. 12, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

[3] Peter Steinfels, "Christianity and the management of intramural dissent," in *Dissent on Core Beliefs, Religious and Secular Perspectives,* ed. Simone Chambers and Peter Nosco (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 98–127, at 108, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316181997.006.

[4] Joseph Ratzinger, "Introduction," in Romano Guardini, *The Lord* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1996), xiv.

[5] Edward Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996).

[6] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, Donum veritatis:* On the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1990), no. 22, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900524_theologian-vocation_en.html.

of the faith is a property of theological faith" but "is also the faith of the Church since God has given guardianship of the Word to the Church."[7] The implication is that the institutional Church, understood as the hierarchical offices of the magisterium, is the ultimate arbiter of the sense of the faith which resides in the whole people of God.

Ladislas Örsy perceived this attachment to central control in the hierarchical Church as a sure recipe for dissent. Indeed, he argued, with the introduction of a new category of "definitive" teaching and with it a new characteristic, "irreformable" (as distinct from infallible), Pope John Paul II's 1998 Apostolic Letter *Ad tuendam fidem* had the effect of "expanding infallibility beyond the constitutions of Vatican I and II." Alluding to the resulting amendment of Canon 750 §2 to state that "one who rejects those propositions which are to be held definitively is opposed to the doctrine of the Catholic Church," Örsy pointed out that "the Fathers of the Council wanted no threats or punishments in their documents, they trusted that faith will attract by its own beauty and persuasive power." He insisted that the resort to "definitive" teaching required the counter-weight of "the scrutiny of the universal episcopate, the scholarly dialectics of the theological community, and the probing of its depth by the *sensus fidelium*."[8]

In the pontificate of Francis however, amid the aftershocks of the seismic upheaval of financial and abuse scandals which marked the truncated papacy of Benedict XVI, synodality wrought a transformation in the focus of ecclesial relationships, toward an expansive and inclusive missionary imperative, and a privileging of lived discipleship over abstract doctrine. In a Church undergoing a radical demographic transition in the direction of the Global South, the voice of the faithful was recognised as an increasingly important channel for synthesising the diverse circumstances, inculturated perspectives and lived experiences of the People of God in a post-Christian world. Moreover, consideration of a hitherto unthinkable concept of a Church of multiple magisteria rather than a single central teaching authority, in a context of increasingly porous doctrinal boundaries, invoked a further imperative of seeking and listening to the voice of the Spirit, inverting the Church's hierarchical pyramid to privilege service over governance, and embracing the grace of conflict in communal progress toward ultimate truth.

Thus, the outworking of the synodal journey now offers the possibility of actualizing what Ormond Rush has described as a "hermeneutical circle" in which the community, theological scholarship, and the hierarchical magisterium embrace a dialogical approach to reception and development of doctrine. This concept engages the reality of multiple operative magisteria (or, more properly, multiple authorities within the one magisterium).[9]

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[7] *Donum veritatis*, no. 35.

[8] Ladislas Örsy, *Receiving the Council: Theological and Canonical Insights and Debates* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2009), 102, 117, 136.

[9] Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 204

Here, Bradford Hinze, advocates that we "allow for the fact that sometimes those who disagree with magisterial teachings or prescribed practices could be carriers, guardians, and defenders of a truth that has not been fully articulated or a moral order that has not yet fully come into view and been realized."[10] He advocates a commitment neither to decision/obedience nor democratic/consensus models, but rather an embrace of the reality of "differentiated consensus" which leaves room for "critical prophetic dissent" and envisions community formation and progression as organic, ongoing and incomplete, exhibiting an enduring provisionality, always open to development, but securely anchored in Gospel values.[11] Accordingly, as Kevin T. Kelly reminds us, whenever the faithful withhold their confirmation of a teaching through their non-reception, it must again be recalled that papal (and magisterial) "articulation of the faith is binding only because it is the faith of the church" that is articulated, that is, it has been received in and by the Church.[12] Patrick Granfield meanwhile, endorsing this perspective that "Christian truth is not an abstraction but exists only in the living faith of the people," points out that the "level of the efficacy of a Church doctrine is limited by the level of its reception," and that "dogmas, canons or moral norms are true not because they are taught by the hierarchy; they are true because they conform to apostolic faith." [13]

Thus, reception, notwithstanding the sometimes-countervailing obligation of obedience claimed by the hierarchical magisterium, becomes pivotal for the understanding of conscience enabled by the synodal approach. Synodality makes space for subject orientation and discernment, engaging, as Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler note, the "four traditional sources of moral knowledge, Scripture, Tradition, reason/science, and experience, the so-called Wesleyan quadrilateral."[14]

Peter C. Phan has argued that processes of learning and teaching are "a task of the whole Church and not only of some special and exclusive groups."[15] He points out that "the entire church must both learn and teach, better still, learn before teaching."[16] Prefiguring the breadth of consultation and reflection promoted in

[10] Bradford Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue in the Catholic Church* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 264.

[11] Bradford Hinze, *Prophetic Obedience* (New York, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016), xxi, 142–43.

[12] Kevin T. Kelly, *50 Years Receiving Vatican II* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2012), 244.

[13] Patrick Granfield, *The Limits of the Papacy* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 149–50.

[14] Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, "Magisterium, Theologians, and the Need for Dialogue," *Horizons* 46, no.1 (2019): 79–112, at 95, https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2019.52.

[15] Peter C. Phan, "From Magisterium to Magisteria: Recent Theologies of the Learning and Teaching Functions of the Church," *Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (2019): 393–413, at 394, https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563919836244.

[16] Phan, "From Magisterium to Magisteria," 408.

the synodal process, Phan proposed five distinct magisteria which together comprise a single integrated magisterium in a synodal key. Specifically, the magisterium of the episcopate is to be augmented with that of theologians, of the lay faithful, of the poor and marginalised, and of non-Christian believers.[17] This list could be further expanded, with the inclusion of the other Christian denominations and the magisterium of the disaffected and estranged. What Phan thus envisages is "a new mode of teaching … marked by deep intellectual humility, a sincere acknowledgment of pluralism within the church itself, and a significant ability and willingness to live with ambiguity."[18]

A widening of the ecclesial tent sees these approaches and engagements positively rather than as threats and manifestations of dissent. Francis' expansive depiction of the Spirit who "everywhere brings forth various forms of practical wisdom which help people to bear suffering and to live in greater peace and harmony," pointed also to the non-Christian religions and their participation in the mission of the Kingdom, as full subjects and not as incomplete or defective objects.[19] Francis' privileging of interreligious encounter and the acknowledgment of the salvific value in non-Christian religions promoted by *Nostra aetate*,[20] may be seen as vindication of Phan's advocacy of dialogue in multiple dimensions, namely the "dialogue of life" and everyday shared experience, the "dialogue of action," collaborating in the works of justice and mercy, the "dialogue of religious experience" in shared liturgies, prayer and worship, and finally the "dialogue of theological exchange."[21]

Western impatience for binary decision-making and enslavement to "the contingent particularity of our own narrative" is profoundly challenged here.[22] The reality of a world Church will not deliver unanimity in every region, particularly on issues where different inculturated understandings on moral issues exist. Therefore, "a negotiation and acceptance of fundamental regional differences on some of these contested issues—women's place in the Church, the rights of non-heterosexual people, clerical celibacy, among others,"[23] may become necessary.

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[17] Phan, "From Magisterium to Magisteria," 409–11.

[18] Phan, "From Magisterium to Magisteria," 413.

[19] Francis, Apostolic Exhortation*, Evangelii gaudium, on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), no. 254, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

[20] Second Vatican Council, *Nostra aetate*: Declaration on the Church's Relations with non-Christian Religions (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

[21] Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 98.

[22] Stan Chu Ilo, "Exploring the Possible Contributions of the African Palaver towards a Participatory, Synodal Church," *Exchange* 50, no. 3/4 (2021): 209–37, at 226, https://doi.org/10.1163/1572543X-12341600.

[23] Ilo, *Exchange,* 234.

Managing disagreement and bearing the tension of conflicting viewpoints, as we have seen, is central to the synodal approach. The work of Michel de Certeau suggests that contention and struggle actually provide the occasion and opportunity for encounter in which the defence of one's own self-interest, and real or perceived rights, brings us to a recognition of the interests and rights of others.[24] The dynamic of conflict, encounter and recognition is, for him, essential for the "cultivation of discernment and for the maturation of conscience," since "division initiates revision of life and progress in the truth." [25] Contra the suppression of divergent perspectives, "knowledge of the real is linked to the knowledge of what others affirm."[26] In *Evangelii gaudium*, Francis spoke of a "willingness to face conflict head on, to resolve it and to make it a link in the chain of a new process."[27] Holding the tension of apparent opposites offers the possibility, through listening and the *parrhesia* of candid speech, of reaching new syntheses in harmonised diversity.

With his encyclical, *Dilexit nos*, issued to coincide with the final days of the Synod's second session, Francis provided a crucial insight into the essential message of his papacy, while at the same time enunciating clearly his expectation for the core orientation of a missionary synodal Church. In a document which would both reassure and challenge traditionalists, he presented an extended and deeply historical meditation on the Sacred Heart of Christ where "it is precisely in his human love, not apart from it that we encounter his divine love," so essential to the task of humanity in the third millennium, which is "to build the civilization of love."[28] He explores and presents with approval the extensive history of devotion to the Sacred Heart and its manifestations in popular piety, and takes the further step of underlining the vital link between "personal spiritual experience and communal missionary commitment."[29] He warns against "those moralizers who want to keep a tight rein on God's mercy," and quotes especially the words of Charles de Foucauld that "our religion is all charity, all fraternity, and that its emblem is a heart."[30] A rhetorical question from the encyclical's concluding section presents the essential unity of the Church's spiritual and social dimensions and challenges an inward-looking Christianity suspicious of, and inclined perhaps to oppose, the expansive vision of the synodal journey: "what kind of worship

[24] Michel de Certeau, "La loi du conflit," in *L'Étranger ou L'Union dans la Différence* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1969), 17–45.

[25] Bradford Hinze, "The Grace of Conflict," *Theological Studies* 81, no. 1 (2020): 40–64, at 45, and de Certeau, 34, https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563920904073.

[26] De Certeau, 40.

[27] *Evangelii gaudium,* no. 227.

[28] Francis, Encyclical *Dilexit nos:* On the Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), nos. 67 and 80, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/20241024-enciclica-dilexit-nos.html.

[29] *Dilexit nos,* no. 91.

[30] *Dilexit nos,* nos. 137 and 179. Charles de Foucauld quote is from his *Letter to l'Abbé Huvelin*, July 15, 1904.

would we give to Christ," Francis asks, "if we were to rest content with an individual relationship with him, and show no interest in relieving the sufferings of others or helping them to lead a better life?"[31]

Moreover, some thirty-five years after the promulgation of *Donum veritatis*, Francis, with his Apostolic Letter *Ad theologiam promovendam,* extended a liberating invitation to theologians to engage with theology in new and expansive ways. A synodal and missionary Church, he proposed, now required an "outgoing" and "fundamentally contextual theology." He urged that theology must not "close itself in self-referentiality" but rather "grasp itself as embedded in a web of relationships, first of all with other disciplines and knowledge." Theology must embody a wisdom which "holds truth and charity together" and theologians must develop "an inductive method which starts from the different contexts and concrete situations" of human life, "allowing themselves to be seriously challenged by reality." Theology is invited to become transdisciplinary and inter-religious in its discernment of the signs of the times and to prioritise what Francis calls "people's common sense" as a *locus theologicus*. The tradition of resorting to *a priori,* deductive approaches must give way to theology built on a culture of encounter, dialogue and discernment, privileging "sapiential knowledge," which is developed in a spiritual frame, rejecting the "abstract and ideological."[32]

Commentators have described *Ad theologiam promovendam* as promoting a novel "nuanced and comparative intercultural theology," which would significantly impact the theological endeavour generally and academia in particular, as "an open theology, focused on dialogue and human experience."[33] It has also been characterised as a paradigm shift which remains "faithful to the organic tradition" but replaces "a magisterial with a synodal way of being Church."[34] The Apostolic Letter is a clear mandate for theologians to move definitively beyond introspection and apologetics and to pursue an "open theology focused on dialogue and human experience … an existential theology across religious borders."[35]

While, arguably, nothing was decided in a dogmatic sense across the two Synodal cycles of consultation and assembly, and no new directives or regulations were immediately promulgated, a trajectory, reinforced by Francis' documents and statements in the second session's aftermath, was definitively established. Still ahead lie the navigation of the contentious terrain mapped by the Synod's

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[31] *Dilexit nos,* no. 205.

[32] Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam,* on Promoting Theology (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), nos. 3–8, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html.

[33] Christopher Longhurst, "Pope Francis' New Relational Theology," *La Croix International* (November 7, 2023), https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/pope-francis-new-relational-theology/18648.

[34] Michael W. Higgins, "The Disruptor Pope," *The Tablet*, 278, no. 9569, (September 14, 2024): 6–7, https://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/the-disruptor-pope/.

[35] Longhurst, *La Croix International*.

ongoing Study Groups and Commissions, and the many new and unforeseen scenarios which human affairs routinely present, in areas such as sexual morality, the perdurance of the patriarchal mindset, and perhaps most of all in challenges to Gospel-infused conceptions of social and ecological justice. Above all, realistically and pragmatically, the unavoidable reality persists that the individual bishops and their episcopal conferences hold the power to determine the progress and penetration of the Church's synodal turn, and that on the response of individuals and communities of faith depends its durability. As Francis counselled, the Church must "be not afraid,"[36] and must move forward, in unity, avoiding both the *pax perniciosa* of spiritual and organizational inertia and the cul-de-sac of ideological polarization.

As we enter a new period of uncertainty, much will depend on the subtle and difficult process of separating the essential from the peripheral, both with respect to the doctrinal hierarchy of truths (a concept through which the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council sought to protect the core of faith from subsequent and often unhelpful accretions), and with respect to the exponentially increasing interconnectedness and moral complexity of human society where the fundamental dignity, the *dignitas infinita* of the human subject in *imago Dei* becomes ever more vulnerable to forces of social determinism and the unrestricted operation of market forces driven by greed, paranoia and various flavours of racialism and sectarianism. It will require the collective effort of all believers to chart and hold a course that will bring humanity safely forward, informed by a consciousness of shared magisterial rights and responsibilities, and conscious too of what Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called the "three weak stones, sitting dangerously in the foundations of the modern Church," namely a government that excludes democracy, a priesthood that excludes women and a revelation that excludes prophecy.[37]

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[36] John 6:20.

[37] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "Letter to Christophe de Gaudefroy," *Letters Inedites*, 80 (October 7, 1929).

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60 YEARS OF VATICAN II:

THE COUNCIL'S WORLD CHURCH AWAKENING AS THE BASIS FOR A CHURCH ON SYNODAL PATHS AND AN INTERCULTURAL THEOLOGY IN EUROPE

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Abstract

With the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church embarked on a process that continues to this day to define its identity as a Church—on a theological-institutional and spiritual-pastoral level—in the diversity of local churches and in their synodal interaction. Karl Rahner, in his oft-quoted speech at the Catholic Academy in Munich after the conclusion of the Council, spoke of the "beginning of the beginning" of a universal Church.[1] The Church is certainly still "beginning" today, but it is beginning in a new way, particularly in light of the growing self-awareness of the churches of the Global South and the political and cultural processes through which new identities are emerging beyond Western influence.

Keywords: Second Vatican Council; world Church; synodality; intercultural theology; *loci theologici*; contextual theology; Pope Francis; *Ad theologiam promovendam*.

Introduction

In the following reflections, in keeping with the aim of this conference to reflect on "*Ad theologiam promovendam*," the methodological-theological foundations of an intercultural theology in Europe in line with this global ecclesial awakening will be examined.

[1] Karl Rahner, *Das Konzil—ein neuer Beginn*, intro. Karl Cardinal Lehmann, ed. Andreas Batlogg and Albert Raffelt (Freiburg/Basel/Vienna: Herder, 2012).

Sixty years after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, the lecture will examine the hermeneutical-theological foundations of this new beginning, the foundations of which were laid in the conciliar texts. The reflections are embedded in the collaboration on the international project of commenting on the conciliar texts "Vatican II—Event and Mandate."

1. A New Perspective on the *Loci Theologici* Doctrine as the Foundation of Contextual Theological Work in the Universal Church[2]

1.1 The Paradigm Shift of the Council

The global ecclesial awakening of the Council is associated with a "paradigm shift"—even if the term is controversial in debates on the hermeneutics of the Council and its reception—it is a "shift in perspective" that is in a sense "unheard of"; it is "new" as the work of the Spirit always makes things new. However, this is precisely something that is supremely founded in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For theology that has developed in the Western tradition, which was characterised in modern times, above all between the two Vatican Councils, by an ahistorical and abstract universalism, this is a "metanoia process." It means that theological work can only take shape "through and in individual cultures"[3] and must thus determine its task of reflecting on faith in the changed historical, social and cultural contexts of global society. According to Marie-Dominique Chenu, there is no theology "without new birth"; theology is faith that is "in solidarity" with the respective era; and it is precisely here that "metanoia," the break and new beginning of theology, is rooted.[4] In the motu proprio *Ad theologiam promovendam* of November 1, 2023, Pope Francis addressed precisely this task of theology: in synodal times, theology must become more "contextual" so that it can interpret the "signs of the times" appropriate to the individual contexts.

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[2] See also the further reflections in: Margit Eckholt, "*Loci theologici* in Times of Synodality: Remarks on Theological Epistemology in Intercultural Perspectives," *Perspectiva Teológica* 56, no. 3 (2024): 389–407.

[3] See Marie-Dominique Chenu, "Préface," in Tharcisse Tshibangu, *La théologie comme science au XXème siècle* (Kinshasa: Presses universitaires du Zaïre, 1980), 7–9, 8–9: "... theology, theologies (in the plural), today in new human contexts, are called upon to seek the understanding of faith through and in cultures that are like their fields of incarnation and that express their values by means other than Greco-European 'reason.'"

[4] See Marie–Dominique Chenu, *Une école de théologie: le Saulchoir*. Avec les études de G. Alberigo, E. Fouilloux, J. Ladrière et J.-P. Jossua (Paris: Cerf, 1985), 136: "C'est précisément l'effort dramatique du théologien de tenir dans la fragilité radicale des propositions où il l'incarne la perception réaliste de la réalité mystérieuse de Dieu: dialectique où sa puissance triomphe de sa débilité—dans la foi. 'Pas de théologie, sans nouvelle naissance.' La théologie, à ce point, n'est donc pas plus que la foi solidaire du temps; elle ne s'enracine pas dans l'histoire."

1.2 Further Developing the *Loci Theologici* Doctrine

This means further reflecting on the doctrine of the *loci theologici*, which was developed during a similar period of paradigm shift in the Western Church, the Reformation, and the era of diverse conquests, and breaking down Eurocentric ways of thinking. According to Thomas Aquinas, the *intellectus fidei* is formed in the tension between *auctoritas* and *ratio naturalis*, whereby ratio is guided to its true meaning in scholastic discourse through revelation.[5] Melchior Cano takes up this idea in his new model of the *loci theologici*. What is new, however, is that he places the authority of philosophers and history alongside the *ratio naturalis* and defines these three as *loci alieni*. The "*ratio naturalis*" cannot be elevated in isolation from historical events and from discourse with the specific philosophical models. Melchior Cano's achievement was to have opened up "foreign" places for the theological process of knowledge alongside the theological places in the "proper sense"—i.e., scripture, apostolic tradition, patristic theology and scholasticism, the councils and the magisterium. In the history of theology, these foreign places remained largely undefined; if they were noticed at all, they tended to be of an accidental nature for theology and had little influence on theological work as such. On the path to discovering the historical and cultural mediations essential to faith and understanding of faith, as well as the new global ecclesial dimension of Christian faith, the "foreign places" have been redefined after the Second Vatican Council and are now regarded as essential sources of knowledge for the theological search for truth. The *loci alieni* stand in a hermeneutic relationship to the *loci theologici proprii*, which means that theology always takes place in reference to the "foreign"—and vice versa. This makes it possible to anchor the new universal ecclesial dimension of faith and understanding of faith that emerged with the Second Vatican Council in theology in such a way that it becomes a defining and transforming moment for theology. The reference to the world and culture in all its diversity thus becomes constitutive for the definition of what the Church is.

This is precisely where the significance of the *loci theologici* doctrine lies as the basic form of theological epistemology in synodal times, in which ecclesial identity is shaped in a lively exchange between the "inside" and "outside" of the Church, in diverse processes of coexistence and exchange. As can be seen in the constitutions, decrees and declarations of the Council, especially in *Gaudium et spes*, *Nostra aetate* and *Dignitatis humanae*, this includes the context of the development of human life and coexistence under modern conditions, the various forms of life that are emerging in the economy, society, and politics and which can only be grasped in the conversation of many, in an open dialogue between cultures and religions.

[5] See Max Seckler, "Die Communio-Ekklesiologie, die theologische Methode und die Loci-theologici-Lehre Melchior Canos," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 187, no. 1 (2007): 1–20, 9.

This is the starting point given by the Second Vatican Council: to develop in a creative way, in times of the global Church and global society marked by diverse tensions, the *loci theologici* doctrine in the sense of a living process of transmission as an event guided by the Spirit in the diverse communication structures of the world. In this way, a *loci theologici* doctrine based on the new hermeneutical interrelatedness of *loci proprii* and *loci alieni* contributes to a new ecclesiological self-understanding that sees the Church in continuous processes of "becoming," out of a "conversion" to that which is its deepest foundation: Jesus Christ, the "God with us," in whom God's love and life have become "concrete," above all as the Gospel for the poor and marginalised and those whose lives are taken away.

1.3 Challenge for Magisterial Theology—Intercultural Theological Work

If, in this sense, the "diversity" associated with different contexts becomes a scientific starting point for theological work, major challenges arise: the validity of perspectives, norms and rules must be renegotiated again and again, and in this sense, what constitutes the "tradition" of Christian faith must be "translated" in a new way into the pluralistic contexts of contemporary cultures and the different local contexts of pastoral and ecclesial practices. The various interventions of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in theological developments in various regions of the world, such as the instructions against liberation theologies in the mid-1980s, the inquiries into interreligious theologies in Asia, but also the criticism and condemnation that theologians in Europe and the United States have encountered since the 1980s when they have presented creative theological approaches in the fields of moral theology and sexual ethics, ministerial theology and ecclesiology, represent a growing "alienation" between theology and the magisterium, especially between the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as the "guardian" of the faith and theological work in the service of discerning the "signs of the times" and new ways of giving expression to the Christian faith and becoming the Church as the people of God in the footsteps of the Second Vatican Council. In the context of the local Church in Germany, we had thus given the impetus for the founding of AGENDA—Forum of Catholic Women Theologians in the mid-1990s. It was no coincidence that this took place after the publication of the apostolic letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (John Paul II, 1994) against the admission of women to the priesthood, precisely in order to offer younger women on their path to theology a forum for mutual support and a protected space to continue working on creative theological approaches in the service of equality and a gender-just Church.

The form and content of the magisterial criticism of new theological approaches also reveal the need for reform of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the necessity of a new form of "quality assurance" so that the dicastery can fulfil its central task of preserving ecclesiastical tradition in a globalised world and in a global Church characterised by diverse cultural dynamics. Peter Hünermann

had already pointed this out in response to the notification on Jon Sobrino's Christology,[6] and this is in line with Pope Francis's new view in *Veritatis gaudium* (VG) on the task of theology in a global Church characterised by diverse intercultural dynamics.[7] Spanish theologian Juan José Tamayo speaks of the need to develop a "diatopic or pluritopic thinking" that "is in conflict with the monotopic ideologies of modernity and in dialogue with other paradigms."[8] This is only possible if the various "contextual theologies" are in continuous intercultural exchange. Then theology can become the "cultural laboratory" "in which the Church exercises that performative interpretation of reality which springs from the event of Christ and is nourished by the gifts of wisdom and science, through which the Holy Spirit enriches the whole people of God in various ways" (VG 3). Intercultural dialogue is therefore not a "purely tactical approach," but springs "from an inner need to share the experience of the joy of truth and to thoroughly examine its meaning and practical implications" (VG 4b). It is precisely the work of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, in keeping with the global ecclesial and intercultural dynamics, that could support the reform process of a Church that sees synodality as a new sign of the ecclesiological, pastoral and theological paradigm shift in the footsteps of the Second Vatican Council.

2. An Intercultural and Intercontinental Rereading of the Conciliar Texts in the Service of Contextual Theology and the Universal Church

The new guidelines for theological studies formulated by Pope Francis in his introduction to *Veritatis gaudium* and in *Ad theologiam promovendam* take into account the global social, political and cultural processes of transformation. Theology can only become a "cultural laboratory" in times of great change if it addresses the diverse socio-political, ecological and cultural challenges in an interdisciplinary exchange. This also includes appropriate reforms at the level of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the decision-making processes in the Roman Curia, in line with the "becoming" of the global Church.[9] The basis for these transformation pro-

[6] Peter Hünermann, "Moderne Qualitätssicherung? Der Fall Jon Sobrino ist eine Anfrage an die Arbeit der Glaubenskongregation," in *Die Freiheit der Theologie. Die Debatte um die Notifikation gegen Jon Sobrino*, ed. Knut Wenzel (Ostfildern: Grünewald, 2008), 51–58.

[7] Francis, *Veritatis gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2017), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20171208_veritatis-gaudium.html.

[8] Juan José Tamayo, *Theologien des Südens. Dekolonisierung als neues Paradigma* (Freiburg/Basel/Vienna: Herder, 2020), 35.

[9] See Margit Eckholt, "'*Veritatis Gaudium*' als Aggiornamento einer Theologie der Welt-Kirche in Zeiten eines 'radikalen Paradigmenwechsels,'" in *Relevante Theologie. "Veritatis gaudium"—die kulturelle Revolution von Papst Franziskus*, ed. Annette Schavan (Ostfildern: Grünewald, 2019), 41–60.

cesses, also at the institutional level, are the documents of the Second Vatican Council, which today, in a new phase of reception of the Council initiated by the pontificate of Francis, must be placed in the context of an intercultural rereading. The conciliar texts are the central reference point for decision-making processes and identity negotiations in a universal Church. What is important from the perspective of the diverse reception processes worldwide is that new subjects and actors and their "voices" have gained authority in the "polyphonic" concert of the global Church (women, indigenous peoples, young people and victims of sexual, spiritual, and intellectual abuse), and it is important to include their voices in the consultation and decision-making processes in the Church on synodal paths. This means learning to deal with asynchronies, uncovering power asymmetries and exclusions, and opening up new spaces for intercultural dynamics. Above all, it means having the courage to embrace ecclesiogenesis in the service of transformation, which grows out of a deep connection to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I am a member of the Steering Committee and co-chair of the intercontinental project *Vatican II: Event and Mandate*, commenting on the 16 documents of the Council in international groups.[10] An intercontinental commentary can only prepare the ground for this new perspective on the perception of ecclesiastical authority and for the development of new approaches to decision-making processes that are viable for the global Church. It will lay important and necessary foundations, but it will also make it clear that the Second Vatican Council cannot provide answers to all new challenges. However, because the Council initiated a far-reaching process of tradition, it opens up new and more extensive paths, which are to be explored in a "critical dialogue" between the diverse voices from different world contexts. In the pontificate of Pope Francis, in my opinion, the balance between the "centre" and the "periphery" has shifted; only by following common paths and discovering asynchronies and uncovering power asymmetries and exclusions can new horizons open up for the Roman Catholic Church. In reference to the diverse, dynamic practices of faith, the Church is in a state of constant "becoming," in "action"; ecclesiological "guidelines" can only be determined discursively and openly, with an eye to the diverse dynamics of faith practices and ecclesiastical acts. The central theological foundations for this are laid down in theological work that can only be understood "contextually," including in the European context, and this means that theology should be close to people and their questions, joys, concerns and fears, and in this sense at the service of a "good life" for the whole of creation.

[10] See also Margit Eckholt, "Vatican II: Legacy and Mandate. An Intercontinental Commentary on the Documents of the Second Vatican Council," *ET Studies* 13, no. 2 (2022): 349–54. See also Sandra Arenas, Edoh F. Bedjra, Catherine E. Clifford, Margit Eckholt, et al., eds., *The Second Vatican Council—General Introduction and Hermeneutics*, vol. 1 of *The Second Vatican Council—Event and Mandate: An Intercontinental Commentary on the Council Documents, Their Reception and Orientation for the Church and Theology* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2024).

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THE AMBIVALENT THEOLOGICAL LEGACY OF POPE FRANCIS:

INSIGHTS FROM SYNODALITY AND THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO ABUSE

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Abstract

This chapter examines the theological legacy of Pope Francis (1936–2025) through the lenses of synodality and the Church's response to abuse. It argues that Francis advances a vision of a more participatory and contextually grounded Church while simultaneously reinforcing papal initiative and continuity with tradition. Drawing on key documents such as *Ad theologiam promovendam* and the 2021–2024 Synod, the study highlights tensions between collegiality and authority, as well as between contextual adaptation and institutional conservatism. The analysis of Francis's discourse on abuse reveals a theological ambiguity regarding individual versus structural and ecclesial responsibility, raising core ecclesiological questions. By engaging contemporary theological and philosophical perspectives, the chapter underscores the challenges of integrating lived experiences, especially those of victims, into the Church's self-understanding. Ultimately, I argue that Francis opened significant yet unresolved pathways toward reform, leaving behind a complex, unfinished, and inherently ambivalent theological legacy for the future.

Keywords: Pope Francis; abuse in the Church; synodality; ecclesiology; contextual theology.

Introduction

The late Pope Francis (1936–2025) consistently used a diverse array of writings to present his theological discourse to the world. One notable example, as the 2025 conference of the European Society for Catholic Theology shows, is the motu proprio *Ad theologiam promovendam* (from now on ATP). This document primarily established new statutes for the Pontifical Theological Academy. While

this document is thought-provoking and encourages contextual theological reflection, it is, however, only a motu proprio. Its primary function was to establish statutes, and the pope did that on his own initiative (i.e., the meaning of the words motu proprio).

As an ecclesiologist, I want to draw attention to two elements. On the one hand, popes often do things on their own initiative. For example, in the field of ecclesiology, it is remarkable that the Synod of Bishops was instituted by Pope Paul VI on his own initiative during the Second Vatican Council through the motu proprio *Apostolica sollicitudo*.[1] While the largest gathering of Catholic bishops ever took place, Paul VI felt the need to act on his own initiative. While this did not necessarily undermine the principle of episcopal collegiality; I would, however, argue that it goes against the ideal of cooperation so central to the understanding of the Council. Paul VI's own initiative even led Church historian John O'Malley to a negative evaluation of the Synod of Bishops as an "instrument of papal primacy."[2]

On the other hand, while contextual theology has long been assumed by scholars, ATP notably features the pope's explicit call for "una teologia fondamentalmente contestuale."[3] The 2023 document *For a Theology from the Mediterranean* shows that this idea is not new, even in ecclesial circles.[4] It called for a contextual and narrative theology, taking into account the particularity of the Mediterranean as bordering on three continents and five shores. The document sees the Mediterranean as a "theological place" that "needs a theology that fully lives its contextual dimension, recognized as its own and indispensable call."[5] Pope Francis addressed this issue in Naples in 2019, and again in Bari in 2020. So, while a pope can do things on his own initiative, it still takes place in a broader context, even when he does not explicitly refer to that context. To conclude the introduction, I would like to reiterate that both the emergence of synodality and the magisterial support for contextual theology occurred within ambiguous documents that emphasised the pope's own initiative.

[1] Paul VI, *Apostolica sollicitudo* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19650915_apostolica-sollicitudo.pdf.

[2] John W. O'Malley, *When Bishops Meet: An Essay Comparing Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019), 80.

[3] Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), no. 4, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.pdf.

[4] See Institut Catholique de la Méditerranée, ed., "For a Theology from the Mediterranean," September 2023, https://icm.catholique.fr/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Manifeste-english.pdf.

[5] Institut Catholique de la Méditerranée, "For a Theology," 6.

Different Takes on Abuse

Why does this paper then tackle the ambivalent theological legacy of Pope Francis? As ATP has shown, interesting hints for further theological reflection can be found in documents that are not necessarily written for the purpose of such reflection. The *motu proprio* was in the first place a legal document.

Something similar happened when Pope Francis visited Belgium in 2024. For systematic theologians, one of the most remarkable moments of the visit was a speech on the second day. As part of the official programme, the pope made a visit to the Royal Palace and was addressed by both King Philippe of the Belgians and the then Prime Minister Alexander De Croo. Both made forceful statements and addressed the issue of sexual abuse and forced adoption, calling the Church to action. When Pope Francis in turn addressed the King, the Prime Minister, and the dignitaries, he unequivocally condemned the abuse perpetrated within the Catholic Church. He has done so on several occasions. However, he repeated his point and emphasized that, although others remind him that abuse happens in many contexts, he maintains that his responsibility is the Church. For Pope Francis, in the Church "even one case is enough for us to be ashamed!"[6] It was impossible to misunderstand the pope, especially as he said that (in the Italian original): "La Chiesa è santa e peccatrice."[7] A literal translation in English would be: "The Church is holy and sinful."

While Pope Francis points towards a more ambiguous, sinful, or messy understanding of the Church in the speech, eventually his solution to a pressing theological problem is elegant. In his understanding, "her members [of the Church] do not always understand and live the message of the Gospel in all its purity and fullness."[8] While this is an elegant way out in the context of a meeting with the authorities and civil society, theologically it is not sufficient. Is the sexual abuse committed by individual Church members only a failure to understand the Gospel in its purity or entirety? Is one ever up to the task of fully understanding and living out the Gospel? Should we simply accept the shortcomings of people in the institution based on a miscomprehension of the Gospel? Is there only individual responsibility, or does the institutional context also play a part? Academic research has shown how theological ideas can be made operative to support and maintain abusive contexts.[9] Moreover, as the Church is a complicated organisation that

[6] Francis, "Meeting with the Authorities and the Civil Society in the Castle of Laeken" (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/september/documents/20240927-belgio-autorita.html.

[7] Francis, "Incontro con le autorità e con la società civile nel castello di Laeken" (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2024/september/documents/20240927-belgio-autorita.pdf.

[8] Francis, "Meeting with the Authorities and the Civil Society in the Castle of Laeken."

[9] See, for example, Ute Leimgruber and Barbara Haslbeck, eds., *Spirituellen Missbrauch verstehen: wissenschaftliche Essays zu Selbstverlust und Gottentfremdung* (Ostfildern: Matthias Grünewald Verlag, 2024).

also holds worldly power, it cannot solve its problems by simply shifting responsibility back to an individual person's misunderstanding of the Gospel.

Without delving too deeply into a variety of more general theological questions spurred by these brief reflections, with M. Therese Lysaught, I argue that synodality, a key element in Francis' pontificate, demands that we accompany everyone on their way. However, that requires "a deeply contextual sensibility." Something Lysaught feels the journal she writes in, namely the *Journal of Moral Theology*, has done from "its outset." This thus affirms that "a primary *locus theologicus* (moral and otherwise) is found in the ordinary, messy realities of the church and the world and that our work is necessarily done in proximity to places of brokenness."[10] This description reflects the (theological) importance of the experiences of many who have suffered at the hands of the Church.

Synodality and Theology

The observation of Lysaught brings to the fore a second observation. For Pope Francis, form and content go hand in hand. In his understanding of synodality, the Catholic Church seeks to walk with everyone. According to the Dutch Jesuit Jos Moons, synodality reshapes the Church profoundly as it requires "a new ecclesial lifestyle … characterized by words like conversation, openness, journeying, and the Holy Spirit."[11]

Two elements are essential to any understanding of synodality in the Catholic Church. On the one hand, it is part and parcel of tradition, as is exemplified by the *Final Document* of the 2021–24 Synod of Bishops. "Rooted in the Tradition of the Church, the entire synodal journey took place in the light of the conciliar Magisterium."[12] Both tradition and continuity are key elements in the understanding of synodality. On the other hand, it also has a strong pneumatological and communal element. "We [the drafters of the FD] invoked the Easter gift of the Holy Spirit, asking Him to teach us what we must do and show us the way forward together."[13] The people of God discern together what God is asking of the Church. That pilgrim journey, according to Moons, is not about "abolishing the truths preserved in the tradition"; synodality is about "a modification of [these truths'] importance; they are not absolute."[14]

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[10] M. Therese Lysaught, "Ad (Synodalem) Theologiam (Moralem) Promovendam," *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, no. 1 (2024): 4–5.

[11] Jos Moons, "A Comprehensive Introduction to Synodality: Reconfiguring Ecclesiology and Ecclesial Practice," *Roczniki Teologiczne* 69, no. 2 (2022): 74, https://doi.org/10.18290/rt22692.5.

[12] Synodus Episcoporum, *Final Document: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), no. 5, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf

[13] Synodus Episcoporum, *Final Document*, no. 12.

[14] Moons, "A Comprehensive Introduction," 80.

As the *Final Document* shows, there is often a preference for continuity in the Church. However, I argue here that continuity and contextuality can conflict. For example, the Church has always engaged with its broader context, but when it comes to democracy, there is a deep reluctance to compare the Church to democratic institutions. Pope Francis emphasised as recently as 2023, with an explicit reference to synodality, that "the Synod is not a parliament; it is something else."[15] Therefore, in the context of the repeated refusal of church leaders to include (more) democratic practices, German systematic theologian Annemarie Mayer asks, somewhat ironically, "If the Catholic Church must not be a democracy, is it then a monarchy, governed by a papal king and a number of episcopal dukes?"[16] Again, this brings to the fore one of the ambiguities of Pope Francis' pontificate. Synodality is part and parcel of tradition; it opens ways to reenvisage or reform the Church, however, it is not about democracy.

This means that more fundamental questions of contextuality are unavoidable. What is so awful about democracy? Why is a monarchical understanding of the papacy to be preferred? Again, O'Malley analysed what he calls the conservative nature of the Church and shows that the challenges run deep:

> Its [the Church] reason for existence is to proclaim a message received long ago. If it fails in that proclamation, it has lost its identity. It cannot change or adulterate the message. Yet, the message is encased in human language and culture and thus is subject to some form of change, especially as it is transmitted through the centuries. How does the church remain faithful to the Gospel while at the same time consciously or unconsciously adapting it to be intelligible and appealing to contemporary men and women?[17]

O'Malley brings in a crucial element in order to understand why the Church often turns to the past. The proclamation of the Church links contemporary communities back to an event of 2000 years ago. Conservative institutions prefer gradual improvement and avoid revolution, for example in a Kuhnian sense.[18] This means

[15] Francis, "Address of the Holy Father Francis at the Opening Session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops" (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/10/04/231004f.html.

[16] Annemarie C. Mayer, "Beyond Hierarchical Fixation: People of God and 'Democratisation' of Church Structures—a Catholic Perspective," in *Ecclesia Semper Reformanda: Renewal and Reform beyond Polemics*, ed. Peter De Mey and Wim François, BETL 306 (Leuven: Peeters, 2020), 377.

[17] O'Malley, *When Bishops Meet*, 8.

[18] Anthony O'Hear, "Conservatism," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2016).

that, while Pope Francis' approach to synodality opens many paths for the future, he does so by drawing strongly from the past.

This tendency to look back, especially on a personal level, is what everyone does. People chart a course for their lives based on their past experience and lessons learnt. However, the practice of looking to the past for solutions to contemporary problems carries the inherent risk of an idealisation of that past, potentially obscuring and overlooking its complexities. In popular culture, Dolly Parton exemplified this in her song *In the Good Old Days (When Times Were Bad)*.[19] Already in the title, Parton plays with the idea that "the past isn't what it used to be."[20] It is important to note that Dolly Parton was born in a family of 12 children and grew up in absolute poverty. Lynn Melnick comments that "Dolly is being ironic in her use of 'good old days.' Nothing in her catalogue of privations is good; this is a perfunctory phrase we use about our past, often forgetting the problems and pain of an earlier time."[21] This kind of looking back could be problematic because it is inauthentic. However, there is a way of looking back and not unnecessarily idealizing the past. As Melnick explains: "Dolly does not forget. Instead, she uses her songs to remember and take control of her experiences, both the good and the bad."[22] This seemingly frivolous example from popular culture raises the question as to how one looks back and how normative or instructive the past can be. It further brings into focus the challenge of confronting past suffering and the ways in which people can reclaim ownership of their personal histories. These experiences also include, but are not limited to, abuse(s). How does the Church find a way to accompany people who have suffered abuse, and how do their stories, which are part of our context, make it into the narrative the synodal Church tells about itself?

Conclusion

As I indicated, albeit only briefly, by referring to Pope Francis' speech in Belgium and his take on synodality, the challenge for the Church is not only to find a way of doing justice to the past, but the more pressing issue is about how to keep up with contemporary developments, and how to reflect on them theologically. Pope Francis tried to do both.

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[19] Dolly Parton, "In the Good Old Days (When Times Were Bad)," Musixmatch, accessed November 4, 2024, https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Dolly-Parton/In-the-Good-Old-Days-When-Times-Were-Bad.

[20] Francis Oakley, "History and the Return of the Repressed in Catholic Modernity: The Dilemma Posed by Constance," in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, ed. Michael James Lacey and Francis Oakley (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 29. Oakley thereby refers to Yogi Berra.

[21] Lynn Melnick, *I've Had to Think up a Way to Survive: On Trauma, Persistence, and Dolly Parton* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2022), 83.

[22] Melnick, *I've Had to Think up a Way to Survive*, 83.

The American Jesuit Thomas Reese, to name one notable example, argued that a strict focus on continuity and stability might be beneficial during periods when societal or political developments occur at a glacial rate. However, amid the turbulence of the 20th and 21st centuries, the Catholic Church's extremely cautious approach to change has often left it trailing behind, facing increasing pressure from the faithful (so from "inside") who perceive a growing disconnect between the Church and contemporary life and society.[23]

Synodality seems to have the potential to inspire a vision that can support the reform of the Church, making it more participatory and open to the world without a wholesale rejection of tradition. From an ecclesial and theological perspective, it is warranted by Church history and the theological developments during and after the Second Vatican Council.[24] Moreover, especially when it comes to the conservative nature of the Church, even the International Theological Commission writes that while "the Church's past structures her present," it only does so "in large part."[25] Looking back, understanding the past is important, but it is never the magic, final, or only solution.

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor maintains that the past serves as an instructive guide to understand the present. "Our past is sedimented in our present, and we are doomed to misidentify ourselves, as long as we can't do justice to where we come from."[26] According to the Flemish philosophers Herbert De Vriese and Guido Vanheeswijck, drawing on Taylor's genealogical approach to the contemporary secular age, this perspective holds significant critical potential. "The historic sediments of foregone ages may always be dug up again and may provoke us to criticize our contemporary ways of living."[27] This suggests that looking back while walking alongside people (i.e., being synodal) can inspire both restorative efforts and a critical examination of current practices, thereby opening the future freed from, or at least less burdened by, the weight of the past. However, applying this to both synodality and the Church's handling of abuse cases again raises challenging questions. Is it really that simple to distinguish

[23] Thomas J. Reese, "Organizational Factors Inhibiting Receptive Catholic Learning," in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, ed. Paul D. Murray, with Luca Badini-Confalonieri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 354.

[24] See, for example, the historical overview and the context of the Second Vatican Council in International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

[25] International Theological Commission, "Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past," in *Texts and Documents 1986–2007*, ed. Michael Sharkey and Thomas Weinandy (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2009), 194.

[26] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 29.

[27] Guido Vanheeswijck and Herbert De Vriese, "The Performative Force of the Postsecular," in *The Routledge Handbook of Postsecularity*, ed. Justin Beaumont, Routledge International Handbooks (London: Routledge, 2019), 94.

between synodality and democracy? Would a separation of powers not serve the Church? Is it so simple to speak of the Church as both *santa* and *peccatrice*? Doing so raises questions about whether an institution itself can be considered sinful.

The long process of the 2021–2024 Synod of Bishops, with an implementation phase until 2028, shows that synodality was not a miracle solution for Pope Francis; it is a profound reflection on what the Church is and what it does. However, the German theologian Daniel Bogner issues an important warning. For him, synodality is "an instrument from the socio-philosophical toolbox of late antiquity," and therefore not simply applicable to today's challenges.[28] In other words, it could be too much looking back to past solutions for contemporary problems. According to Bogner, the long and complicated history of synodality and the various interpretations it has undergone make it difficult to apply it meaningfully in the present context.[29]

Without overlooking this warning, I conclude by highlighting that while Pope Francis has indicated promising and academically fascinating paths, the Church has not yet reached a point where it can rest on its laurels, and it might never do so. The goal of Pope Francis to make the Church more synodal and contextual has not yet been reached. The Church is aware, as *Gaudium et spes* no. 43 indicates, that there lies "a distance ... between the message she offers and the human failings of those to whom the Gospel is entrusted."[30] Although substantial reforms have taken place since 1965, and despite Pope Francis's significant contributions to addressing these failures, considerable work remains. Pope Francis advanced many of these reforms during his pontificate, yet he has also left his successor with a substantial agenda to carry forward.

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[28] Daniel Bogner, "'Journeying Together': Does a Synodal Church Improve Respect for the Human Person?" in *Doing Theology and Theological Ethics in the Face of the Abuse Crisis*, ed. Daniel J. Fleming, James F. Keenan, and Hans Zollner, Global Theological Ethics 3 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2023), 176.

[29] Bogner, "'Journeying Together,'" 191–92.

[30] Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium et spes* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), no. 43, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

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THE DOCTRINAL AUTHORITY OF THE FAITHFUL ACCORDING TO JOHN HENRY NEWMAN:

A HISTORICAL-THEOLOGICAL PROFILE

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Abstract

This chapter examines John Henry Newman's understanding of the doctrinal authority of the faithful, highlighting its historical roots, theological development, and contemporary significance. Beginning with *The Arians of the Fourth Cent*ury and *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, it analyses Newman's conception of the *sensus fidelium* as an essential witness to Tradition and a constitutive element of the Church's doctrinal life. The study then explores the reception of Newman's insights in the ecclesiology of Yves Congar, Jean Guitton, and the Second Vatican Council, particularly *Lumen gentium*. Finally, it considers the relevance of Newman's thought for current debates on synodality, the prophetic vocation of the laity, and the relationship between the *sensus fidelium* and ecclesial authority.

Keywords: John Henry Newman; doctrinal authority of the faithful; *sensus fidelium*; laity; ecclesiology; synodality; Vatican II; Yves Congar.

In the current context of historical, ecclesial and ecclesiological transformations, it is clear that the life and mission of the Church cannot ignore the lay faithful, their action and their contribution to Christian witness. Indeed, the role of the laity is today more fundamental than ever for a credible Church, one that is aware of the need for reform, starting from the subjectivity of the entire People of God and rethinking the consequences of its centrality.

This reality, which even today is difficult to accept in many circles, was prophetically recognised and courageously promoted by John Henry Newman

(1801–90)[1]—recently declared Doctor of the Church by Pope Leo XIV. As a precursor of the theology of the laity and a forerunner of the Second Vatican Council, Newman not only worked hard to promote the dignity of the laity, but also and above all he supported their vital function in the Church, as an exercise of the prophetic *munus* of baptism and as a reform of doctrinal authority.

This contribution aims to present Newman's theological thought on the role of the laity in the Church, especially its involvement in the conservation of the faith and therefore of Tradition, starting from the historical-patristic studies he conducted. It will also attempt to highlight how Newmanian thought influenced two figures who promoted the laity at the Council: Yves Congar and Jean Guitton. Finally, it will offer some preliminary reflections on themes considered salient for contemporary theological debate and for ecclesial life itself.

The Arians of the Fourth Century: A Historical Foundation for the Laity's Authority

From the beginning of his theological thinking, in tune with his own research for ecclesial belonging in the context of the Oxford Movement, Newman tried to understand if the Church of his period was similar or different from the first Christian communities[2] and what role the laity had within it. Newman envisioned a laity as "not an emanation […] of the clergy or subordinate to it, but an integral part of the mystical body of Christ"[3] and, therefore, fully capable of intervening in questions concerning the life of the Church itself.

Newman writes:

> I want a laity, not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious, but men who know their religion, who enter into it, who know just where they stand, who know what they hold, and what they do not, who know their creed so well, that they can give an account of it, who know so much of history that they can defend it. I want an intelligent, well-instructed laity. I wish you to enlarge your knowledge, to cultivate your reason, to get an insight into the relation of truth to truth,

[1] See José Morales Marín, *Newman (1801–1890)* (Madrid: Rialp, 2025). For a complete edition of Newman's works, see John Henry Newman, *Collected Works of J.H. Newman*, 36 vols. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1870–1879).

[2] See Ian Ker, *Newman on Being a Christian* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 83.

[3] Fortunato Morrone, "Introduzione," in John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro vita sua*, ed. Fortunato Morrone (Milan: Paoline Editoriale Libri, 2015), 73. Here and in other quotations, the translations from Italian or French are provided directly.

> to learn to view things as they are, to understand how faith and reason stand to each other […]. In all times the laity have been the measure of the Catholic spirit.[4]

The earliest testimonies of Newman's thinking on the laity can be found in the *Lectures on the Prophetical Office of the Church*,[5] in which he argued that the custody of Tradition is entrusted to the entire Church, bishops and laity.

However, the work with which Newman began to enlighten the theological foundation of the faithful's doctrinal authority—when he was still an Anglican, at the beginning of the Oxford Movement—was the historical-theological investigation of the Arian crisis in *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (1833).[6] Here, Newman attested how the true apostolic faith was preserved through the *sensus fidei* of the laity, whereby it was the people who were the reliable and truthful interpreters of Christian doctrine. In this way, Newman came to distinguish between orthodox and heterodox believers: in the case of the struggle against Arianism, he showed how the "governed," namely the laity, remained orthodox rather than the "governors," meaning the bishops. Referring to this, Newman notes: "Taking a wide view of the history, we are obliged to say that the governing body of the Church came short, and the governed were pre-eminent in faith, zeal, courage and constancy."[7]

Bringing "the proofs of the fidelity of the laity, and the effectiveness of that fidelity, during that domination of Imperial heresy,"[8] Newman writes:

> I mean still, that in that time of immense confusion the divine dogma of our Lord's divinity was proclaimed, enforced, maintained, and (humanly speaking) preserved, far more by the *Ecclesia docta* than by the *Ecclesia docens*; that the body of the Episcopate was unfaithful to its commission, while the body of the laity was faithful to its baptism; that at one time the pope, at other times a patriarchal, metropolitan, or other great see, at other times general councils, said

[4] John Henry Newman, *The Present Position of Catholics in England* (London: Ballantyne and Company, 1851), 390–91.

[5] See John Henry Newman, *Lectures on the Prophetical Office of the Church Viewed Relatively to Romanism and Popular Protestantism*, in *The Via Media of the Anglican Church*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1901).

[6] This work was published in 1833, before Newman's conversion to Catholicism (which occurred in 1845). The focus on the topic in question can be found in the third edition of the text, dated 1871, in which is known as "Note Five," entitled *The Orthodoxy of the Body of the Faithful during the Supremacy of Arianism*.

[7] John Henry Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1890), 445. For an example of this: "*Audivi ac vidi vitia praesentium, non laicorum, sed episcoporum*." See Hilary of Poitiers, *Epistula de Synodis* 63, *Sources Chrétiennes*, vol. 621, ed. Michael Durst (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2021), 338–43.

[8] Newman, *The Arians*, 466.

> what they should not have said, or did what obscured and compromised revealed Truth; while, on the other hand, it was the Christian people, who, under Providence, were the ecclesiastical strength of […] great solitary confessors, who would have failed without them.[9]

Newman states that "it was mainly by the faithful people that Paganism was overthrown,"[10] thus affirming the value of the laity in the custody of Tradition.

On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine: A Theology for the Laity's Authority

The importance of the *communis fidelium sensus*, that Newman had traced and outlined during his early research, was expanded and specified in an article that appeared in *The Rambler* magazine in July 1859, entitled *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*.

Leaving aside the political-ecclesiastical reasons that pushed Newman to write it, the fundamental fact that emerges from the text is that the mission of the Church cannot be carried out just by the clergy but also in a way that is proper to the laity, who participate in the apostolate that Christ entrusted to the Church. Newman writes: "Yet each constituent portion of the Church has its proper functions, and no portion can safely be neglected. Though the laity be but the reflection or echo of the clergy in matters of faith, yet there is something in the *pastorum et fidelium conspiratio*, which is not in the pastors alone."[11] In this sense, Newman argues that the contribution of all the faithful—the body of the faithful—is a testimony to Tradition and a source of Revelation.

To better understand this aspect of Newman's thought, it is necessary to answer two questions: What does "consult" mean? How should episcopal authority relate to the *sensus fidei fidelium*?

Newman responds:

> The English word *consult*, in its popular and ordinary use, is not so precise and narrow in its meaning; it is doubtless a word expressive of trust and deference, but not of submission. It includes the idea of inquiring into a matter of fact, as well as asking a judgment […] the *fidelium sensus* and *consensus* is a branch of evidence which it is

[9] Newman, *The Arians*, 465–66. According to Newman, during the Arian crisis, the *activum instrumentum docendi* of the bishops was virtual (or theoretical).

[10] Newman, *The Arians*, 446.

[11] John Henry Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* (Lanham: Sheed & Ward, 2006), 103–4. See also Jan Walgrave, "La consultation des fidèles en matière de doctrine selon Newman," *Concilium* 4 (1985): 35–43. The references from *Concilium* are always to the French edition of the journal.

> natural or it necessary for the Church to regard and consult, before she proceeds to any definition, from its intrinsic cogency.[12]

In short, this is the principle of the *conspiratio fidelium et pastorum*, in which the *fidelium consensus* is fully *instrumentum traditionis*, "the voice of the infallible Church,"[13] thanks to that sense of correct faith that Newman calls the *illative sense* or, following Johann Adam Möhler (1796–1838), *ekklesiastikon phronema* (*Kirchenbewusstsein*, in German).[14] Papal infallibility, moreover, for Newman, is also an expression of this *conspiratio*: the pope, in fact, is infallible *in docendo*, precisely thanks to the *consensus* of the faithful, who are infallible *in credendo*. Infallibility *in credendo* is, therefore, the necessary requirement for infallibility *in docendo*. Here, the interpenetration of the different dimensions of the Church and the offices of its members is evident.[15]

Newman's Reception in Yves Congar and Jean Guitton

Newman's teaching accompanied the reflection on the laity until the dawn of the theological renewal that took place at the beginning of the 20th Century and, subsequently, until the Second Vatican Council. Among the theologians who were clearly inspired by Newman on the question of the laity, two are worthy of note: Yves Congar (1904–1995) and Jean Guitton (1901–1999).[16]

In 1953, Congar published *Jalons pour une théologie du laïcat*, attempting for the first time to systematically qualify the layperson based on his relationship with the whole world, capturing its specificities: "A layperson is one for whom things exist […]. For to him or her what is to be referred to the Absolute is the very reality of the elements of this world whose outward form passes away."[17]

According to Congar, the ecclesial ministry of the layperson is to mediate between the Church and the world, just as that of the hierarchy is to mediate between Christ and the Church:

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[12] Newman, *On Consulting*, 54–55. See also Michael Sharkey, "Newman on the Laity," *Gregorianum* 68 (1987): 339–46.

[13] Newman, *On Consulting*, 63.

[14] See Newman, *On Consulting*, 73–75. See also Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Gilbert and Rivington, 1874), 36–97. On Möhler, see Johann Adam Möhler, *Symbolism. Exposition of the Doctrinal Differences between Catholics and Protestants as Evidence by Their Symbolical Writings* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1997).

[15] This theme was developed by Newman in the *Preface* to *The Via Media*, XX–XXX. See Francis Davis, "Le rôle et l'apostolat de la hiérarchie et du laïcat dans la théologie de l'Eglise chez Newman," *Revue des Sciences religieuses* 34 (1960): 329–349, https://doi.org/10.3406/rscir.1960.2265.

[16] See Bernard-Dominique Dupuy, "Newman's Influence in France," in *The Rediscovery of Newman: An Oxford Symposium*, ed. John Coulson (London: SPCK, 1967), 147–73.

[17] Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church. A Study for a Theology of Laity* (London: G. Chapman, 1957), 21.

> The hierarchy exercises the mediation of the means of grace between Christ and the faithful; the latter exercise a mediation of life between the Body of Christ and the world, and this also is a means of grace in its order. The world is drawn to Christ in and through the faithful […]. In this way then are their respective parts allotted so that the hierarchy and the faithful may form one Church and carry out her mission to the full.[18]

Between the lines of Congar's thought, the exposition on the role of the laity has a strong pneumatological connotation, in that the *sensus fidelium* is aroused by the Holy Spirit, inspiring the lay faithful's activities.[19]

Trying to find a synthesis of Congar's thought on the laity, it can be found in the sixth chapter of *Jalons* where, referring to the ancient adage *quod omnes tangit, ab omnibus tractari et approbari debet*,[20] he conceives and defines prophecy as the faithful's cooperation in the teaching function of the Church, in which the bishops are guarantors of common orthodoxy.[21]

"The part of the faithful […] is to live the Apostolic Deposit; living it, to safeguard it and, safeguarding it, to develop it."[22] Congar argues: "We should welcome the idea defended by Newman […] according to which the *sensus fidelium* is not limited to the act of the magisterium but adds to it its own value as testimony, and, possibly, an element of development."[23]

In 1963, coinciding with the celebration of the Second Vatican Council and ten years after the *Jalons*, Guitton published *L'Église et les laïcs*, in line with Newman and Congar.

Guitton writes:

> The Holy Spirit guides the Church by the order of government and by the order of witness. Now, in this second domain, the laity have a very living part. Both as a body and as individuals, the laity must bear witness. Whether they help the apostles to teach the nations, or

[18] Congar, *Lay People*, 111.
[19] See Congar, *Lay People*, 258.
[20] See Congar, "Quod omnes tangit, ab omnibus tractari et approbari debet," *Revue historique de droit francais et étranger* 35 (1958): 210–59.
[21] See Congar, *Lay People*, 267. About this specific theme, see Andrew Meszaros, *The Prophetic Church: History and Doctrinal Development in John Henry Newman and Yves Congar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[22] Congar, *Lay People*, 280.
[23] Congar, *Tradition and Traditions. An Historical and a Theological Essay* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), 327.

> whether they labor to make the Church more conscious of the deposit of faith, the laity, in union with the Hierarchy, are witnesses to and shapers of their Faith.[24]

Here too, the prophetic *munus* is crucial and distinctive in defining the identity and action of the Christian layperson, since it is the source for every witness of the faith in Christ "in the world."[25]

The layperson, according to Guitton, is *vir propheta*:

> And it is here that the word *Prophet*, so dear to Newman, takes on its full meaning. The Prophet is the man of God; he is also the man who closely attends, not to the abstract dialectic of history so dear to the false prophets, but to the real, ever new, never predictable movement of divine and human history. Plunged in time, nourished by its mystery, the prophet considers each day in the light of eternity, that he may strive to utter the truth most needed for that day.[26]

Newman's Reception in *Lumen Gentium*

The beginning of Newman's theological path about the laity, can be found in essence, I believe, in the fourth chapter of the dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium*. Newman's insights, in fact, greatly influenced the Council's debates: he was an "absent father," but, as Guitton stated, "Newman illuminates the Council with his presence, and the Council justifies Newman."[27]

In the constitution's chapter *De laicis*, regarding the prophetic *munus*, the Fathers wrote:

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[24] Jean Guitton, *The Church and the Laity: From Newman to Vatican II* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1965), 46–47.

[25] "The lay ideal is the opposite to that of the priest or the religious. For reasons of apostolate, the latter may dress as a layman, but this does not alter the fact that his proper office is to represent the *sacred* among men. And the religious habit symbolizes the mystery: it is the visible sign of the splendour of his calling [...]. A layman can scarcely wish to be 'a religious in the world,' and, in a sense, he is right. The lay Christian must be in the world as belonging to the world, and not as *not* belonging to it [...]. The essential character of the layman, I have said, is to be intimately incorporated in the society of other men, to such an extent that he is individualized only by the accomplishment of what are called 'duties,' but are better regarded as 'services.' Thus, a lay spirituality necessarily places the emphasis on 'the duties of one's state in life.' The layman should seek his perfection, not in an Office added to his 'services' (as would be the recitation of prayers, which is precisely *the duty of his state* for a priest or religious), but in a spirit of service in its plenitude. The layman is incarnated in his communities-in his family, his profession, his social life." Guitton, *The Church and the Laity*, 134–35 and 137.

[26] Guitton, *The Church and the Laity*, 154–55.

[27] Guitton, "Il card. Newman all'ora del Concilio," *L'Osservatore Romano* 7 (1964): 6–7.

> Christ, the great Prophet […] continually fulfils His prophetic office […] not only through the hierarchy who teach in His name and with His authority, but also through the laity whom He made His witnesses and to whom He gave understanding of the faith and an attractiveness in speech so that the power of the Gospel might shine forth in their daily social and family life […]. The laity go forth as powerful proclaimers of a faith in things to be hoped for […]. This evangelisation, that is, this announcing of Christ by a living testimony as well as by the spoken word, takes on a specific quality and a special force in that it is carried out in the ordinary surroundings of the world […]. Consequently, even when preoccupied with temporal cares, the laity can and must perform a work of great value for the evangelisation of the world.[28]

In light of this, and in line with what Ian Ker, one of the greatest scholars of Newmanian thought, has pointed out, it can be affirmed that this is "faithful to the organic conception of the Church as described in *Lumen Gentium* and as understood by Newman."[29]

The *Sensus Fidei Fidelium* as the Foundation of Lay Subjectivity

In the wake of Newman's teaching, many themes can be the subject of reflection for a future theology that can truly promote the dignity and role of the laity in the Church: three of them are perhaps more interesting and current than ever.

In light of the entire theological tradition on the *sensus fidelium*,[30] which sees in Newman a masterful synthesis and a courageous defence, and recognising that the *universitas fidelium* […] *in credendo falli nequit*, "the entire body of the faithful […] cannot err in matters of belief"[31]—in what sense can we today speak of a

[28] Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium* (LG) (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), no. 35, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

[29] Ian Ker, *Newman on Vatican II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 105.

[30] In addition to the previous references, consider the Augustinian adage *securus judicat orbis terrarum* (see Augustine of Hippo, *Contra epistolam Parmeniani* III, 24, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, vol. 51, ed. Michael Petschenig (Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1908), 129–131) and the maxim of Vincent of Lérins according to which dogma *ubique, semper et ab omnibus creditum est* (See Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitorium* 2, *Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina*, vol. 64, ed. Robert Demeulenaere (Turnhout: Brepols, 1985), 148–49). So, the *sensus fidei fidelium* indicates a knowledge, a sensitivity that, coming from faith through baptism, illuminates its contents: the peak of the *sensus fidelium* is the *consensus*, that is the agreement of all the baptized carried out in the *conspiratio fidelium et pastorum*—of Newmanian memory—regarding certain contents of the faith itself: the Holy Spirit is at the origin of the *sensus fidei*, with whom all baptized participate in the *tria munera* of Christ.

[31] LG 12.

magisterial authority of the *sensus fidelium*? Can this authority be expressed in the theological commitment of the laity? How can we understand the consultation and deliberation of the People of God in the synodal process in light of Newman?

The Magisterial Authority of the *Sensus Fidelium*

In *Lumen gentium* we read that the Holy Spirit makes the faithful "fit and ready to undertake the various tasks and offices which contribute toward the renewal and building up of the Church."[32]

One of the fundamental tasks that Newman left to the contemporary Church, concerns the question of authority within the Church in relation to what the Holy Spirit inspires within it. But what kind of authority belongs to the People of God? The Holy Spirit legitimizes the authority of the faithful,[33] so "whoever participates in the prophetic office of Christ cannot do so in the form of silence and passivity."[34] In light of the *conspiratio* enunciated by Newman, the magisterial authority in the Church is given and exercised in a communal form: "The *sensus fidei* forms the magisterium and the magisterium is formed by the *sensus fidei*";[35] these are two moments aimed not at a question of power, but rather of service in evangelisation.

Regarding this, Leonardo Boff writes:

> In the Church there is a mutual apprenticeship; there is a moment when the hierarchy must listen […]. There is a moment when the layperson must speak and testify of the Gospel's truth […]. The hierarchy, then, feels himself to be a member of the learning Church and the layperson feels himself to be a member of the teaching Church. Each is in turn master and disciple of the other, and all are followers of the Gospel.[36]

The Theological Commitment of the Laity

Newman, as already said, desired a well-informed laity, well-prepared on questions of faith. This is why it's exciting for me to be able to share a second theme, right here in Dublin, where Newman wanted to establish a Catholic university. Can the *sensus fidelium*, which is the *illative sense*, be expressed by some lay people as a theological commitment?

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[32] LG 12.

[33] See Christian Duquoc, "Le peuple de Dieu, sujet actif de la foi dans l'Église," *Concilium* 4 (1985): 95–104.

[34] Heinrich Fries, "Existe-t-il un magistère des fidèles?" *Concilium* 4 (1985): 106.

[35] Dario Vitali, "*Universitas fidelium in credendo falli nequit* (LG 12). Il sensus fidelium al Concilio Vaticano II," G*regorianum* 86 (2005): 613.

[36] Leonardo Boff, "La distinction entre Ecclesia docens et Ecclesia discens est-elle justifiée?" *Concilium* 8 (1981): 102–3.

Newman believed so! Indeed, theologians are "spokespeople" for the *sensus fidelium*, as attested by the International Theological Commission:

> As a service towards the understanding of faith, theology endeavours, amid the *conspiratio* of all the charisms and functions in the Church, to provide the Church with objective precision regarding the content of its faith, and it necessarily relies on the existence and correct exercise of the *sensus fidelium.* The latter is not just an object of attention for theologians, it constitutes a foundation and a *locus* for their work. Theology itself, therefore, has a two-fold relationship to the *sensus fidelium*. On the one hand, theologians depend on the *sensus fidei* because the faith that they study and articulate lives in the people of God […]. On the other hand, theologians help the faithful to express the authentic *sensus fidelium* by reminding them of the essential lines of faith, and helping them to avoid deviations and confusion caused by the influence of imaginative elements from elsewhere.[37]

The Commission itself stated that "there is indeed in the Church a certain 'magisterium' of theologians."[38] Therefore, for the Church, the theological contribution of the laity is essential, not just for their own promotion, as indicated by the Council, but for the benefit of the Church itself. Indeed, if the magisterium will integrate in itself the lived experience of the faithful, its teaching would be more powerful[39]; moreover, for Newman, it is the *schola theologorum*, that is, the authority of the faithful, that evaluates papal and conciliar pronouncements with the careful, acute and subtle investigation that is proper to it.[40]

Consultation and Deliberation of the Laity in the Synodal Journey

What co-responsibility, then, do the laity have in the Church? As Pope Francis said, the synodal journey "is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to

[37] International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014), no. 8, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html.

[38] International Theological Commission, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria*, no. 39, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20111129_teologia-oggi_en.html. Regarding the mention of Thomas of Aquinas about the *magisterium cathedrae pastoralis* (of the bishops) and the *magisterium cathedrae magistralis* (of the theologians), see fn. 87 of the document.

[39] See Congar, "Un essai de synthèse," *Concilium* 8 (1981): 124–27.

[40] See Newman, *A Letter Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Norfolk* (New York: The Catholic Publication Society, 1875), 4 and 159–60.

put into practice."[41] Indeed, the International Theological Commission cited Newman as a father of reflection on synodality,[42] precisely because of what he said and wrote about the laity, attempting to initiate a concrete reconfiguration of the self-consciousness, carefully considering the relationship between the laity and the episcopate, reflecting at the same time on a Church as a subject and a Church made up of subjects. The challenge, therefore, as Pope Francis wrote, is "generating processes of people-building,"[43] almost seeming to have assumed Newman's ecclesiological and epistemological reasons.[44]

The two burning issues of today's debate regarding synodality are consultation and deliberation: let me suggest that just as Newman explained what consultation meant, I think he could have provided an insightful and theologically sound definition of deliberation.

Among the many reflections on this matter, it is interesting to mention the rethinking of leadership in the Church by resorting to the sociological categories of *decision-making* and *decision-taking*: these would, in fact, allow us to overcome the consult/deliberate dichotomy, and to approach a form of community discernment and the shared exercise of authority.[45] This point too can be illuminated by Newman's concept of *conspiratio*.

The fact remains that "they are, by reason of the knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which they may enjoy, permitted and sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on those things which concern the good of the Church,"[46] since "their activity is so necessary within the Church communities that without it the apostolate of the pastors is often unable to achieve its full effectiveness."[47]

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[41] Francis, *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

[42] See International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018), no. 38, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

[43] Francis. *Evangelii gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), no. 224, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

[44] See Patrick Manning, "Why Consult the Laity? A Theological Justification," *The Furrow* 69 (2018): 204–205.

[45] Two examples of interesting contributions on the topic in Italian: see Alphonse Borras, "Soltanto consultivo? Sul valore del consigliare nella Chiesa," *La Rivista del Clero Italiano* 5 (2016): 377–93. See also Serena Noceti, "Elaborare decisioni nella Chiesa. Una riflessione ecclesiologica," *Sinodalità. Dimensione della Chiesa, pratiche nella Chiesa*, ed. Riccardo Battocchio and Livio Tonello (Padova: Edizioni Messaggero, 2020), 254.

[46] LG 37.

[47] Second Vatican Council. *Apostolicam actuositatem* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), no. 10, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html.

The wish is that the Church would continue to reflect about itself on the footsteps of Newman's thought and above all to act according to Newman's insights. As Newman himself wrote to the Duke of Norfolk, quoting Luis de Molina, "God requires of the Church a co-operation and investigation."[48]

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to draw attention to a meeting with Bishop W. B. Ullathorne. Newman reported that: "He said something like 'Who are the laity?' I answered that the Church would look foolish without them."[49] Newman could not have known the remarkable relevance that his thought would have on subsequent theological reflection. Newman's interest in the laity, in their dignity as baptized persons, and in their prophetic role in the Church, is central to much thought today. Newman's perspective was prophetic: "The answer is plain, viz. because the body of the faithful is one of the witnesses to the fact of the tradition of revealed doctrine, and because their *consensus* through Christendom is the voice of the Infallible Church."[50]

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[48] Newman, *A Letter*, 132.
[49] Quoted by Coulson, *Introduction* to Newman, *On Consulting*, 18–19.
[50] Newman, *On Consulting*, 63.

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ENDA MCDONAGH IN THE LIGHT OF *AD THEOLOGIAM PROMOVENDAM*

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Abstract

This chapter considers the theology of Irish theologian Enda McDonagh in light of Pope Francis's call in *Ad theologiam promovendam* for a theology that is open to the world and attentive to the concrete realities of human existence. It examines McDonagh's theological method, particularly his understanding of theology as reflection on lived reality in the light of the Gospel and his insistence that theology be undertaken from the "fringes" of human experience. Three dimensions of his work are explored: his Christian anthropology and emphasis on human dignity and solidarity; his reflections on baptism and ecumenism in the divided context of Northern Ireland; and his engagement with questions of peace, justice, and human rights. The chapter argues that McDonagh's approach anticipates key features of the theological renewal advocated by Pope Francis, demonstrating a theology that is contextual, pastoral, and directed towards conversion and discipleship. It concludes by considering the implications of this approach for the contemporary teaching and practice of theology.

Keywords: Enda McDonagh; *Ad theologiam promovendam*; theological method; contextual theology; Christian anthropology; ecumenism; social justice; Pope Francis.

This chapter argues that a consideration of the theology of Enda McDonagh provides some insight into a theology which is open "to the world, to humanity in the concreteness of its existential situation, with its problems, wounds, challenges, [and] potential."[1] It focusses on McDonagh's theological method and his perception of the ways in which theology is at the service of the Church and the world, and it identifies some of the characteristics of his theology as these emerge.

[1] Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam*, apostolic letter issued motu proprio (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), no. 3, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html.

Enda McDonagh was the Professor of Moral Theology and Canon Law at St Patrick's College Maynooth (later St Patrick's Pontifical University Maynooth) from 1958 until his retirement in 1995. An academic all of his life who could have "settled for a desk theology!"

At the time of his death in February 2021 a statement from the Irish Bishops Conference termed him "a colossus on the Irish theological landscape for more than six decades,"[2] and an obituary in the Irish Times described him as "a theologian and churchman whose contribution to the intellectual life of Christianity [in Ireland] was equalled by few in his generation."[3]

In *Ad theologiam promovendam*, Pope Francis called theologians to do their theologising at the margins, and in *Spes non confundit*,[4] he named specific human realities that could be understood as being at the margins of human living and interrelationships.

> • Places in the world torn by the ravages of war;
> • the sick and suffering, the disabled;
> • young people facing an uncertain future, those lacking employment or job security or realistic prospects after finishing school;
> • migrants, exiles, displaced persons and refugees;
> • the elderly, who frequently feel lonely and abandoned;
> • the billions of poor and impoverished people who often lack the essentials of life, water, and food—he described hunger as a scandal, an open wound on the body of humanity when the goods of the earth are destined for all.[5]

If these are some of the margins ("fringes" in McDonagh's words),[6] from where theology is to be done, what might that look like? For McDonagh, doing theology is systematic reflection on people's existential reality in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.[7]

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[2] Michael Neary, "Statement from Archbishop Michael Neary on the Death of Father Enda McDonagh RIP," (February 25, 2021), https://www.catholicbishops.ie/2021/02/25/statement-from-archbishop-michael-neary-on-the-death-of-father-enda-mcdonagh-rip/.

[3] John Horgan, "Enda McDonagh Obituary: A Theologian Scholar with a Towering Intellect," *Irish Times* (February 24, 2021), https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/religion-and-beliefs/enda-mcdonagh-obituary-a-theologian-scholar-with-a-towering-intellect-1.4494107.

[4] Francis, *Spes non confundit: Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), (hereafter SNC), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/20240509_spes-non-confundit_bolla-giubileo2025.html.

[5] See SNC nos. 9–15.

[6] Enda McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation: Doing Theology at the* Fringes (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986).

[7] Enda McDonagh, *The Gracing of Society* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1989), 8.

To Anselm's definition of "theology as faith seeking understanding," McDonagh adds hope and love.[8] He says hope is the presence and power of God, the Holy Spirit—at work sustaining Christian theologians in discerning the coming of the reign of God,[9] and love indicates that the theologian "is working out of a living faith" which is relational and so must include "the broader society and praxis."[10]

What Does This Look Like for McDonagh?

This question is explored by considering his approach from three different perspectives.

Perspective One

The first of these is Christian anthropology. McDonagh does not often use this term but it is a concept that runs through much of his writing. In a chapter entitled "The Dignity of the Undignified," McDonagh begins by recalling the account Elie Wiesel gives in *Night* of the young boy hanged by the SS but who took half an hour to die. Wiesel writes, "I heard the man cry again: 'Where is God now?' And I heard a voice within me answer 'here he is—he is hanging here on the Gallows.'"[11]

McDonagh goes on to identify a whole range of contemporary situations about which the same question is being asked. Today his list would read something like this: children are injured in the attacks on Gaza, families without food are being shot as they approach trucks from relief agencies, women and children are hungry and cold in refugee camps, people are trying to cross borders to safety in a new country, families are having to move from their villages and livelihoods on Pacific islands because of the rising oceans, and people ask "Where is God now?" McDonagh adds that this question arises too "in more conventional and accessible slums and shanty towns across Asia, Africa and Latin America," and surfaces "persistently and acutely in millions of typical cases in the 'affluent … West'—cases of domestic violence, drug addiction, discrimination, terror and all sorts of oppression and imprisonment."[12]

He argues that it is only when we reflect on these realities at the fringes or margins of human living from the perspective of faith, accepting fully and seriously that we are all sisters and brothers[13] in Christ, that we hear the call to be

[8] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation*, 135.
[9] McDonagh, *The Gracing of Society,* 6.
[10] McDonagh, *The Gracing of Society,* 5.
[11] Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), 70–71.
[12] Enda McDonagh, *The Making of Disciples* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982), 128.
[13] Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

like Jesus, to seek out and befriend the outcast and "undignified" of this world.[14] There is a need for us, he says, to move from an individual awareness of each of us being created in the image and likeness of God to an awareness that we are all in the image and likeness of God. McDonagh argues that "a deeper shift of consciousness is demanded whereby I think primarily in inclusive 'us' terms rather than in 'me' and the 'other' or in an exclusive 'us' and 'them.'"[15] Taking those at the margins seriously leads us to recognise McDonagh's claims that for most of us the only way we can cope with the reality of those we find at the margins is to fence them off, as it were. He says "Pilate's handbasin is invisibly at our side."[16] There are other people who take care of these things. He says there is "the awkward difficulty of reconciling the God of the privileged and oppressing people with the God of the deprived and oppressed."[17] Being at the margins with those recognised as sisters and brothers causes McDonagh to develop a theology that is grounded in the reality of what God is doing in Christ. It is from that reality that he reflects on the meaning of being one in the Christ who emptied himself to the point of sharing our human condition. McDonagh describes this act as God's "climactic expression of solidarity with all of [human]kind."[18] He claims such solidarity is the way of human salvation, pioneered by Jesus, offered to us as gift and task in the concrete relationships of our lives. He says, "[F]leeing to the suburbs, offering them cake or employing others for that kind of thing to escape personal involvement will not entitle us to … validate our claims as sons and daughters … because we refuse the demanding task of being brothers and sisters of one another."[19] In all of this we find very strong echoes of Francis's encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*.

Perspective Two

A second perspective from McDonagh's work relates to the ecumenical movement and the sacrament of baptism in the mid-1980s' context of Northern Ireland. What happens when one reflects on this theologically, not from the peace and quiet of one's university office, but rather from the concrete situations encountered in that time and place?

The human reality was one of the deep divisions and separations among Christians in Northern Ireland both religiously and politically.[20] Religiously, Christian traditions included the Church of Ireland, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Methodist communities, and politically divisions were along unionist or nationalist lines

[14] McDonagh, *The Making of Disciples,* 129.
[15] McDonagh, *The Making of Disciples,* 132.
[16] McDonagh, *The Making of Disciples*, 129.
[17] McDonagh, *The Making of Disciples*, 129.
[18] McDonagh, *The Making of Disciples*, 136.
[19] McDonagh, *The Making of Disciples*, 136.
[20] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation*, 84.

with religious and political divides not necessarily matching up in any predictable way.[21]

Having described the existential reality for Christians in that particular place and time in a way which would have evoked strong feelings, McDonagh's theologising in this context begins by identifying key elements of the theology of baptism. Given the fact that the churches generally "accept the validity of baptism performed in the other [Christian traditions],"[22] he works from a Catholic theological perspective in the following way. Christ is encountered within the believing community first in baptism and then through the other sacraments. The baptism of even one new person is a community event. The person is baptised into the death and resurrection of Christ within the believing community as a whole.[23] In the celebration of baptism the community enters anew into the death and resurrection of Christ. Further reflection leads McDonagh to claim that "Baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ is baptism into the great Church which is the one Christ, the one body of Christ."[24] This understanding of baptism, he argues, has "inter-Church implications."[25] It means that a baptism in one of the traditions involves all of the other traditions as well—a new member is welcomed into the Body of Christ.[26] McDonagh acknowledges that his initial response to those who ask how the divisions among Christians in Northern Ireland can be overcome is to say "They should stop baptising."[27] While he admits this is shock tactics, doing theology from the fringes of this complex community raises serious questions about taking our Christian faith seriously and endeavouring to understand what it means for our living. He asks if a beginning might be to ensure other Christian community members are represented at a Catholic baptism and the Catholic community is represented at the baptisms in other Christian communities? He asks if this might be one small way of raising awareness that the openly hostile and divided reality of Christians is quite contrary to what is being celebrated in the sacrament of baptism within each church community. Drawing on his motif of the reign of God, McDonagh argues that it is the power and presence of God in the sacraments which is the source of our hope for the "fulfilment and transformation of humanity and cosmos."[28] He says "It is precisely in this critical area of Northern Ireland that Christians must be prepared to take the ecumenical movement fully seriously and face the risks involved in taking Christ at his word and his sacrament."[29]

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[21] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation,* 85.
[22] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation,* 82.
[23] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation,* 83.
[24] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation,* 84.
[25] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation,* 83.
[26] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation*, 84.
[27] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation*, 84.
[28] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation,* 86.
[29] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation*, 85.

Perspective Three

The context of the third perspective is an address to *Pax Christi International* in Vicenza in 1987 on the theme of peace and justice in the Christian tradition. Most theologians might be tempted to turn to their bookshelves and reach for the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* and any of several documents from recent popes and episcopal conferences. But not McDonagh. Immediately he homes in on the actual situation of the people with whom he is speaking. The title he gives his presentation is in the form of a question: "Peace-Makers or Justice Seekers?" He begins by laying out what he calls the "Disciples' Dilemma."[30] He notes a number of aspects of their existential situation: the tensions between seeking justice and maintaining peace in a concrete reality where, in many instances, the only way to promote human rights is by armed revolution; the fear in affluent countries of nuclear war and annihilation; the poverty and political oppression of many in the Third World along with denial of economic, social, political and civil rights, and the denial of political and civil rights in the Second World of Eastern Europe prior to 1989. Overlaying all of this he identifies and acknowledges the complexities of the exploitation of the South by the wealthy imperialist North.[31]

In this instance the discourse operates at two levels: the experience of all whose lives are impacted by the challenges just identified, and then, for all who belong to *Pax Christi International*, the actuality of living and working at the margins.[32] This is the ground on which McDonagh stands as he theologises, reflecting from the perspective of faith, in the hope of enabling the Christian disciple to transform "the dilemma into a genuine possibility."[33] McDonagh's theological reflection draws on Catholic social teaching and the Scriptures.

He identifies the tension between individual rights and the rights of peoples together and recalls the Christian tradition which acknowledges the essential inter-relationality of people which means at times that what is necessary for the community may override individual claims. Further, he observes that rights language frequently claims what are understood as individual moral rights.[34] These claims do not always sit with the Christian call to "friendship, perseverance, forgiveness, hope, humility, charity, courage, patience, prudence, joy, thanksgiving, mercy, compassion, love…"[35]

McDonagh then turns to the scriptures indicating that Jesus did not assert his rights at any point or protest against the obvious injustice of false witnesses or

[30] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation*, 41.
[31] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation*, 41–42.
[32] *Pax Christi International* is the global Catholic peace movement dedicated to promoting Gospel nonviolence, justice, and reconciliation rooted in Catholic social teaching. https://paxchristi.net/our-mission/.
[33] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation*, 42.
[34] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation*, 43.
[35] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation*, 43.

the bias of the judges' claims.[36] He considers the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel (Mt 5–7) indicating that the Beatitudes are the very opposite of discourse about claiming rights. In the context of Jesus' proclamation of bringing good news to the poor, release for prisoners and healing for the sick, McDonagh suggests that in the face of contemporary understandings of human rights, disciples may be called to sacrifice some perceived rights so that others may have what will enable them to live more fully the dignity that is theirs.[37]

His consideration of peace in the context of the scriptural understanding has a similar call. Peace brought about through the action of oppressors against the oppressed is not the peace of the scriptures. McDonagh points out that "the peace of the New Covenant and the New Creation … is salvation and reconciliation, healing of hostility and division, the opposites of peace. But it is not a band aid or superficial healing. It is not a cloaking of real and continuing divisions … it … involves continuing conversion of the hostile to one another in Christ … And it opens the way to transformation and fulfilment for humanity and cosmos."[38] But he reminds his listeners that it is a way open only through the Cross. Peace and the respecting of human rights are only possible through the recognition of one another as sisters and brothers and a commitment to live in solidarity with each other fully aware of all that that may demand from each person.[39]

Conclusion

Firstly: In each of these examples of McDonagh doing theology, his starting point of bringing to life the existential reality of each situation has the effect of drawing people into that reality, moving one to moments of real encounter with the other and to experience the call of the other. When one begins to think theologically from the perspective of those at the margins, one cannot avoid recognising the call to change, to conversion, to become more fully disciples of Christ. This is consistent with McDonagh's claim that "in specifically Christian terms the best expression of all theologizing is the making of disciples."[40]

Secondly, what does this mean for the teaching of theology? This becomes quite a critical question when the teaching of so many theologians in the academy is constrained by administrative requirements including in some cases by the *Ratio Studiorum* for seminarians. The need to cover course content and meet award requirements can lead to a sense of having to "get through" this week's topic. McDonagh's approach and methodology encourage the question as to how one's teaching of theology needs to change if it is to begin from the margins. What does

[36] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation*, 43.
[37] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation*, 44.
[38] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation*, 46.
[39] McDonagh, *Between Chaos and New Creation*, 49–50.
[40] McDonagh, *The Making of Disciples,* 2.

this mean in the academy? How does the teaching of theology need to be characterised into the future? Will starting from the frontiers of human living be more effective in helping students, seminarians, and lay students, to actually engage in "the doing of theology"?

Thirdly, when the starting point of one's theology is "at the margins," recognising each other as sisters and brothers, one's theology will be pastoral in "tone" (*timbro*).[41]

Enda McDonagh foreshadowed the call of Pope Francis to theologians to be people who are "able to read and interpret the Gospel in the conditions that now prevail and in which men and women live their everyday lives in the variety of their locations, cultures and societies."[42]

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[41] *Ad theologiam promovendam,* no. 3.
[42] *Ad theologiam promovendam,* no. 4.

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HISTORICAL PRACTICES AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE DIACONAL MINISTRY

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Abstract

This chapter explores the roles and functions of women deacons in the early Church. It considers the ecclesiological, disciplinary and sociocultural factors that led to the restriction of women's participation, and the subsequent decline of the diaconate as a permanent ministry. It then examines the restoration of the permanent diaconate in the 20th century, particularly following the Second Vatican Council. Particular focus is given to magisterial statements and theological reflections since the early 1990s, especially the renewed emphasis on the diaconal dimension of the Church and reinterpretations of the sacramentality of ordained ministry. Situating current debates within their historical and ecclesiological contexts clarifies the sacramental and ecclesial implications of women participating in diaconal ministry. It also evaluates the prospects for further theological and magisterial discernment.

Keywords: Women and the diaconate; permanent diaconate; theology of the diaconate; sacramentality of diaconate; Second Vatican Council; Special Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazonian Region; Synod on Synodality.

The re-establishment of the diaconate for women is a topical issue in the Catholic Church, and it has significantly marked the discussion at the last two Synods of Bishops: The Special Synod for the Amazon Region and the Synod on Synodality. Calls for the restoration of the diaconate as a permanent ministry as well as calls for women to be admitted to the diaconate have been growing since the beginning of the 20th century. These demands were motivated by pastoral reasons and were also inspired by the social atmosphere of the time, which was characterised by women's struggle for equality and subsequent reflection on the subordinate role of women in the Church. In some local Churches, the topic of

women's diaconate has become topical due to the influence of theological and pastoral exchange with Protestant[1] and Orthodox Churches.[2]

In order to understand the contemporary discussion, this chapter provides an overview of the history of women's participation in the diaconal ministry within the Church, including the roles they performed and the reasons why they were gradually denied diaconal ministries and responsibilities. After that, key moments of new theological and pastoral reflection and discussion on the restoration of the permanent diaconate, beginning mainly with the Second Vatican Council, are presented. Particular focus is given to the new theological and magisterial emphases in the theology of the diaconate since the early 1990s. These link the ministry to the diaconal function of the Church, opening up new opportunities for women to participate in ministry, based on new interpretations of the sacramentality of ministry.

The Diaconate and Testimonies About Deaconesses in the History of the Church

Deacons, men and women (Greek: ὁ/ἡ διάκονος, -ου), existed in the Church from the first Christian communities up to the twelfth century.[3] The New Testament writings (Phil 1:1; Rom 16:1; 1 Tim 3:8–13) testify to their existence in the early Church. Today, however, it is impossible to unequivocally reconstruct how the diaconal office was established or what their responsibilities were.

According to the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 6:1–6), the ministry emerged in response to the need to support widows. The term "serving at tables" (Acts 6:2) refers to social and charitable duties. According to the same report, however, seven men, including Stephen and Philip, "full of the Spirit and wisdom" (Acts 6:3) were chosen for the ministry. As they were involved in missionary preaching as well as "serving at tables" (Acts 6:8; 8:4–13; 8:26–40), it can be concluded

[1] See Dorothea Reininger, *Diakonat der Frauen in der Einen Kirche: Diskussionen, Entscheidungen und pastoral-praktische Erfahrungen in der christlichen Ökumene und ihr Beitrag zur römisch-katholischen Diskussion* (Ostfieldern: Schwabenverlag, 1999); Annette Möller, *Die Geschichte des Diakonats in evangelischer Perspektive* (Berlin: Verband Evangelischer Diakonen-, Diakoninnen- und Diakonatsgemeinschaften in Deutschland e. V. – VEDD, 2011) 26–27.

[2] Phyllis Zagano, "Catholic Women's Ordination: The Ecumenical Implications of Women Deacons in the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Orthodox Church of Greece, and the Union of Utrecht Old Catholic Churches," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 43, no. 1 (2008): 124–37.

[3] See John Wijngaards, "Women Deacons in Ancient Christian Communities: Leadership and Ordination," in *Patterns of Women's Leadership in Early Christianity,* ed. Joan E. Taylor and Ilaria L. E. Ramelli (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 195.

that, in addition to providing material support to those in need, the deacon's ministry also comprised proclaiming the gospel in the early Christian community.[4] This is also indicated by the breadth of meaning of the group of words διακονέω, διακονία, διάκονος in the New Testament, which, in addition to the basic meaning of caring for "service at tables," also signifies concrete lived imitation of Jesus and engaged ministry to Christ's gospel.[5] Appointment to the ministry of a deacon was done by the laying on of hands and prayer (Acts 6:6).

Two places in the New Testament specifically mention women deacons. The First Epistle to Timothy outlines the qualities that deacons must have (1 Tim 3:8–13), with a specific section addressing women: "In the same way, the women must be dignified, not slanderers, but temperate and faithful in all things" (1 Tim 3:11). Contrary to some interpretations, eminent theologians and biblical experts, due to the whole context, have convincingly argued that the text actually refers to women deacons.[6] Another explicit mention is found in the Epistle to the Romans, which refers to Phoebe as a "servant" (διάκονος; accusative διάκονον in the text) of the Church in Cenchrea (Rom 16:1). She was not only responsible for the social-charitable work of the community in Cenchrea,[7] but as the leader of the

[4] See Lorenz Oberlinner, "Die Pastoralbriefe. Erste Folge: Kommentar zum ersten Timotheusbrief," in *Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament,* vol. XI, 2/1, ed. Joachim Gnilka, Rudolf Pesch, Heinz Schürmann and Rudolf Schnackenburg (Freiburg im Br.: Herder, 1994), 133.

[5] See Alfons Weiser, "Diakon. I. Im Neuen Testament," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche.* Sonderausgabe, Dritter Band, Dämon bis Fragmentenstreit, ed. Walter Kasper et al. (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 2006), 178–79; Norbert Mette, "Diakonia," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche.* Sonderausgabe, Dritter Band, Dämon bis Fragmentenstreit, ed. Walter Kasper et al. (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 2006), 184–85.

[6] See Oberlinner, "Die Pastoralbriefe. Erste Folge: Kommentar zum ersten Timotheusbrief," 139; Jennifer H. Stiefel, "Women Deacons in 1 Timothy. A Linguistic and Literary look at 'Women Likewise…' (1 Tim 3.11)," *New Testament Studies* 41, no. 3 (1995): 442–457; Jean Daniélou, "Le ministère des femmes dans l'Église ancienne," *La Maison Dieu* 61, (1960): 70–96; Yves Congar, "Effort Diaconal. Ordination des Femmes au Diaconat. Colloque de Paris 16–17 mars 1974," (1974) 31–37, accessed August 31, 2024, https://womenpriests.org/fr/articles-fr/effort4-sur-le-diaconat-feminin/ (8); Marie-Josèph Aubert, *Des femmes diacres. Un nouveau chemin pour l'Église* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1987).

[7] See Michael Theobald, *Römerbrief: Kapitel 12–16*, *Stuttgarter Kleiner Kommentar. Neues Testament*, vol. 6/2, ed. Paul-Gerhard Müller (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1993), 225; Hanneliese Steichele, "'Auf das Wort der Frau hin kamen sie zum Glauben' (Joh 4,39). Die Rolle der Frau in der urchristlichen Seelsorge," in: *Zwischen Alltag und Ausnahme: Seelsorgerinnen. Geschichte, Theologie und gegenwärtige Praxis,* ed. Sabine Pemsel-Maier (Ostfildern: Schwabenverlag, 2001), 30; Ursula Sigg-Suter, Esther Straub and Angela Wäffler-Boveland, *"… und ihr werdet mir Söhne und Töchter sein." Die neue Zürcher Bibel feministisch gelesen* (Zürich: TVZ Theologischer Verlag, 2007), 42.

community she was also responsible for preaching.[8] Although at the time of the writing of the Epistle to the Romans the title ἡ διάκονος was not yet unambiguously used for an official ministry of deacon because Church ministries were not yet structured, it is obvious "that Phoebe performed a recognized ministry in the community in Cenchrea, which was subordinate to the ministry of the apostles."[9] Gnilka concludes from the texts that the female diaconate is "a noteworthy heritage of Pauline communities."[10]

The existence of the diaconal office in the later history of the Church is attested to by numerous authors and writings from the patristic period, such as Clement of Rome, the *Didache*, Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, Irenaeus of Lyons, Origen, the *Apostolic Constitutions*, Cyprian, Clement of Alexandria, (Pseudo) Dionysius the Areopagite, Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition* and many others.[11] According to St. Ignatius of Antioch, deacons represent Christ in their own way in the community of the Church,[12] and St. Irenaeus calls them the successors of the apostles.[13] According to the writings from the patristic period, deacons served at tables and cared for the needy. They also performed certain tasks during Eucharistic celebrations, particularly in organising the liturgy, distributing communion, and carrying it to the sick and prisoners. They also served and assisted in baptism by immersion. They are regularly mentioned as relating to the bishop. In the first half of the 3rd century, Hippolytus Romanus's *Apostolic Tradition* defines deacons as being ordained "not for the priesthood, but for the ministry to the bishop" (Latin: *non ad sacerdotium, sed ad ministerium episcopi*).[14] This reference "to the bishop" later disappeared, as can be seen in

[8] See Anni Hentschel, *Gemeinde, Ämter, Dienste. Perspektiven zur neutestamentlichen Ekklesiologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 229.
[9] See International Theological Commission, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002), II, IV.
[10] Joachim Gnilka, *Teologija Novoga zavjeta* (Zagreb: Kršćanska sadašnjost, 1999), 181.
[11] See Erio Castellucci, "I diaconi nella vita della Chiesa: vocazione, carisma. Elementi per una teologia del diaconato," *Orientamenti pastorali* 53, no. 7 (2005): 80–119. Cited according to the online edition, accessed September 18, 2024, https://www.diaconimessina.it/index.php/riflessioni-sul-diaconato/i-diaconi-nella-vita-della-chiesa-vocazione-carisma-elementi-per-una-teologia-del-diaconato; Ante Mateljan and Terezija Tea Škarec, "Đakonat i đakonese. Povijest i budućnost đakonata žena u Crkvi," *Služba Božja* 50, no. 1 (2010): 33–36.
[12] According to Gottfried Hammann, *Die Geschichte der christlichen Diakonie. Praktizierte Nächstenliebe von der Antike bis zur Reformationszeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003).
[13] According to Castellucci, "I diaconi nella vita della Chiesa."
[14] Hippolytus Romanus, *Traditio apostolica*, ed. Bernard Botte, Sources chrétiennes 11 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1968), 58.

both dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* of the Second Vatican Council (LG 29) and the current liturgy.[15]

Many areas of the deacon's activity are discernible from warnings related to the abuse of office and authority[16] or from prohibitions and limitations of authority pronounced at councils. During the Middle Ages in the Christian East, a permanent diaconate with liturgical functions was maintained, while in the West, especially from the 9th century onwards, it increasingly became a transient degree of the holy order on the way towards the presbyterate and episcopate. The Council of Trent touched on the diaconate only in passing, arguing that the hierarchy of the Church consists of bishops, presbyters and deacons (Latin: *ministri*) of divine institution.[17]

In addition to the indirect mention of female deacons by Pliny the Younger in Bithynia at the beginning of the 2nd century, the first direct testimony is usually the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (II, 25–26; III, 6, 12, 13), probably written in Syria in the 3rd century. From this document, it is evident that deaconesses assisted in baptism of women and the anointing of the sick, and they also conducted catechetic instruction. Their tasks did not differ from those of male deacons.[18] Similar information is provided by the *Apostolic Constitutions* from around 380–400, where it is evident that the same conditions of election apply to female and male deacons. Women assisted in the baptismal liturgy of women and the pastoral care of the sick (especially women), of the infirm and of the poor in the Church community. Deaconesses were ordained by the bishop, just like male deacons, in the presence of the community, and they belonged to the clergy.[19] The names of many deaconesses are also known from patristic writings, above all that of Olympia through her correspondence with bishop St. John Chrysostom in the 4th century.[20]

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[15] See *Rimski pontifikal* [Roman Pontifical]. *Ređenje biskupa, prezbitera i đakona* (Zagreb: Kršćanska sadašnjost, 2000) 12–13.

[16] See Drago Tukara, "Razvoj biskupske i prezbiterske službe u prvim stoljećima Crkve," *Diacovensia* 26, no. 2 (2018): 267.

[17] See Castellucci, "I diaconi nella vita della Chiesa"; Theresia Hainthaler, "Diakonat der Frau," in *Frauen in kirchlichen Ämtern. Reformbewegungen in der Ökumene*, ed. Margit Eckholt, Ulrike Link-Wieczorek, Dorothea Sattler and Andrea Strübind (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 223–46.

[18] See Cipriano Vagaggini, "L'ordinazione delle diaconesse nella tradizione greca e bizantina," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 40, (1974): 151–154; Abraham Andreas Thiermeyer, "Der Diakonat der Frau. Liturgischgeschichtliche Kontexte und Folgerungen," in *Frauenordination. Stand der Diskussion in der Katolischen Kirche,* ed. Walter Groß (München: Wewel, 1996), 55; Corrado Marucci, "Povijest i vrijednost ženskog đakonata u Crkvi prvih stoljeća," *Svesci* 96 (1999): 20–21.

[19] See Thiermeyer, "Der Diakonat der Frau. Liturgischgeschichtliche Kontexte und Folgerungen," 55–57; Marucci, "Povijest i vrijednost ženskog đakonata u Crkvi prvih stoljeća," 21.

[20] See Cettina Militello, "Il servizio ecclesiale: Olimpiade e Crisostomo," in *E Dio li creò… Coppie straordinarie nei primi 13 secoli di cristianesimo*, ed. Clementina Mazzucco, Cettina Militello and Adriana Valerio (Milano: Edizioni Paoline, 1990), 113–40.

Writings from the 4th to the 16th century and surviving sacramentaries demonstrate that there were several rites for the ordination of female deacons that were truly "sacramental," just like the rites for the ordination of male deacons.[21] The earliest rite is found in the aforementioned *Apostolic Constitutions*, which testify that deaconesses were also ordained by the laying on of hands and a prayer containing an anamnesis, epiclesis, and doxology.[22] Imperial legislation like that of Emperor Justinian (482–565) as well as numerous other writings also talk about deaconesses, numbering them amongst all clerics, minimum age, etc. Admittance to the office of deaconess was preceded by ordination, marked by the laying on of hands (Greek: χειροτονία, χειροτονέω, translit. *cheirotonía*, *cheirotoneo*).[23] In most cases the rituals were identical for men and women, and the terms χειροτονία and χειροθεσία (translit. *cheirotonía* and *cheirothesía*) are used interchangeably and translated into Latin without distinction as *impositio manus* or *impositio manuum* (Vogel, 1972, 10–11, 20).[24] Testimonies about deaconesses are also provided by numerous other writings such as the *Didache* or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, the *Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, the *Testament of our Lord Jesus Christ* from the end of the 4th century from the area of Syria, and others.[25] The existence of deaconesses is also confirmed at the Council of Chalcedon from 451, at the Third Council of Constantinople from 681[26] as well as at the Synod of Worms in 868.[27]

Over the centuries and according to particular contexts, the tasks of the deaconesses changed. It seems they were gradually denied some ministries over time. For example, the exclusion of women from the liturgy was rooted in misogynistic stereotypes and views of women's alleged physiological impurity.[28] Another possible reason for the decrease in the number of deaconesses ordained is probably the decrease in the number of adult baptisms.[29]

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[21] See Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1976) 72; Marucci, "Povijest i vrijednost ženskog đakonata u Crkvi prvih stoljeća," 25; Wijngaards, "Women Deacons in Ancient Christian Communities," 195.

[22] See Thiermeyer, "Der Diakonat der Frau. Liturgischgeschichtliche Kontexte und Folgerungen," 55–57; Marucci, "Povijest i vrijednost ženskog đakonata u Crkvi prvih stoljeća," 21; Mateljan and Škarec, "Đakonat i đakonese," 43–44.

[23] See Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church,* 72, 148; Phyllis Zagano & Bernard Pottier, "Što znamo o đakonisama?" *Obnovljeni Život* 77, no 4 (2022): 549.

[24] See Cyrille Vogel, "Chirotonie et chirothésie. Importance et relativité du geste de l'imposition des mains dans la collation des ordres," *Irénikon* 45 (1972): 7–21; 207–38.

[25] See Daniélou, "Le ministère des femmes dans l'Église ancienne," 83; Mateljan and Škarec, "Đakonat i đakonese," 44–45.

[26] See Thiermeyer, "Der Diakonat der Frau. Liturgischgeschichtliche Kontexte und Folgerungen," 59.

[27] See Mateljan and Škarec, "Đakonat i đakonese," 47; 49.

[28] See Zagano & Pottier, "Što znamo o đakonisama?" 551–52.

[29] See Wijngaards, "Women Deacons in Ancient Christian Communities," 195.

Attitudes Towards the Diaconate of Women at the Second Vatican Council and in Post-Conciliar Documents

Although the question of re-admitting women to the diaconate appeared in proposals for the Council discussions, the Second Vatican Council itself did not consider the possibility of ordaining women to Church ministries.[30]

The Council did vote to restore the diaconate as a permanent sacramentally ordained ministry, several centuries after its disappearance. The judgment on its establishment was left to the bishops' conferences, with the approval of the Bishop of Rome (LG 29; AG 16). The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church aligns with the Council of Trent's statement and Pope Pius XII's apostolic constitution *Sacramentum ordinis* with which he concluded the discussion on the sacramentality of the diaconate.[31] Both documents define the diaconate as the first degree of the sacrament of Holy Orders (LG 29; AG 16). *Lumen gentium* states: "At a lower hierarchical level stand the deacons; hands are laid on them 'not for priesthood, but for ministry'" (LG 29). The word "*episcopi*" in the phrase "*sed ad ministerium Episcopi*" is omitted, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, and in the note the Council text does not even refer to Hippolytus Romanus, but to *Constitutiones Ecclesiae aegyptiacae*, *Statuta Ecclesiae antiqua* and other writings.

On 18 June 1967, Pope Paul VI issued the motu proprio apostolic letter *Sacrum diaconatus ordinem,* in which he provided detailed instructions on the duties of a deacon. Following the conciliar text, he limited the diaconate to men but opened it to married men as a permanent ministry.[32] According to this provision, both permanent and temporary diaconates belong to the same order and are conferred by the same rite.[33]

The theology of the diaconate in postconciliar discussion proceeded in two directions. The first of these connects the ministerial priesthood and the sacrament of Holy Orders as a whole with an ecclesiology anchored in the Eucharist. It links the diaconal ministry with the Eucharist. The deacon participates in the mission of the High Priest, and his duties differ from those of the common priesthood of all the faithful. The second interpretation distinguishes between the episcopate and presbyterate, which are for the priesthood, and the diaconate, which is for

[30] See Serena Noceti, "Nel senso di una profezia e di una promessa. La riflessione sul ministero ordinato alle donne," in *Tantum aurora est. Donne e Concilio Vaticano II*, ed. Marinella Perroni, Alberto Melloni and Serena Noceti (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2012), 321.

[31] See Pius XII, *Sacramentum ordinis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1947), nos. 1–2, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/la/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19471130_sacramentum-ordinis.html.

[32] See Paul VI, *Sacrum diaconatus ordinem. General Norms for Restoring the Permanent Diaconate in the Latin Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1967), nos. 2, 11, 13, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19670618_sacrum-diaconatus.html.

[33] Paul VI, *Sacrum diaconatus ordinem,* no. 36.

ministry.[34] The difference between them is qualitative, not hierarchical or of degree, since the ministry of the deacon is founded on *diaconia*, i.e. service. This interpretation is also prevalent today in the theology of the diaconate and builds on the same place of *Lumen gentium*, which states that deacons are "dedicated to the duties of Christian charity and assistance" (LG 29). It develops the theology of the diaconate within Christian *diaconia* as an integral part of the Holy Order. The sacramental sign and sacramental ministry place the Church's concern for the direct implementation of works of charity for the benefit of those in need at the centre of the Church's life and activity, whereby the Church community gains greater credibility in proclaiming the Gospel. According to this interpretation this intention can be interpreted from the overall direction the Second Vatican Council was taking and was probably the reason for the re-establishment of the permanent diaconate in the Church.[35]

Advances in the Understanding of the Theology of the Diaconate and Their Implications for the Diaconate of Women

The International Theological Commission studied the issue of the diaconate of women in two five-year sessions, from 1992 to 1997 and from 1997 to 2002. The work was entrusted to a special sub-commission whose task was to analyse certain ecclesiological issues. The 2002 document of the International Theological Commission states that the sub-commission could not complete its work by drafting the text, in the first convocation, so a new sub-commission was appointed to build on the previous work.[36] However, Zagano and Pottier argue: "Apparently, the seventeen-page document was completed in 1997 in favour of the Church tradition of deaconesses, but the president of the International Theological Commission, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at the time, refused to sign it and appointed a new sub-commission."[37]

In 2002, the second sub-commission compiled an extensive document entitled "From the Diaconia of Christ to the Diaconia of the Apostles" and concluded that: in the ancient Church deaconesses were not completely identical to deacons; the

[34] International Theological Commission, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles.*

[35] See Eckholt, "Die Bedeutung des Frauendiakonats für das Werden einer geschwisterlichen Kirche," 174–82; Serena Noceti, "Donne e ministero diaconale. Ministero possibile per una nuova Chiesa," *Riječki teološki časopis* 26, no. 2 (2018): 304; Irmentraud Kobusch and Jutta Mader-Schömer, "Network Diaconate of Women—Genesis, Goals and Tasks," in *Sacramental Diaconate of Women,* ed. Network Diaconate of Women, 2024, 8, accessed August 1, 2024, https://diakonat.de/fileadmin/PDF/Weltsynode/englisch_Sacramental_diaconate_of women.pdf.

[36] See International Theological Commission, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles.*

[37] Zagano & Pottier, "Što znamo o đakonisama?" 550.

unity of the sacrament of Holy Orders is strongly emphasised in the Church tradition, especially in the teaching of the magisterium, with a clear distinction between the ministries of bishops and priests, and the ministry of deacons; the ministry of discernment established by the Lord in the Church should speak authoritatively on this issue.[38]

Phyllis Zagano and Bernard Pottier contend that recognising the historical difference between the diaconate and the priesthood facilitates the restoration of the tradition of ordaining women as deaconesses. However, in contrast to the assertions made previously in the declaration *Inter insigniores*, that women cannot be the image of Christ,[39] the authors propose a further sub-distinction, stating: "The deacon serves *in persona Christi* and does not participate in the priesthood and its ministries which are *in persona Christi capitis ecclesiae*."[40] Many contemporary theologians hold that these two forms of sacramental representation are inseparable and should not be subordinated to one another, as this would diminish the sacramental significance of the diaconate. However, this distinction allows for further theological reflection on the special character of the diaconate and its importance for the development of a "diaconal Church," a Church that serves. Margit Eckholt believes that starting with the requirements and practices of a diaconal Church and the role of the diaconal ministry as it is realized, a sacramental diaconate for women should also be developed.[41]

The ministry of love (*diakonia*) is just as important for the Church as the proclamation of the word and the celebration of the sacraments, and it is an essential part of both Church's mission and the centre of its activity, which cannot be delegated.[42] The diaconal ministry in the very ministerial structure of the Church reflects and imitates the Christ who serves. This ministry brings the needs of people into the interpretation of the Gospel and the celebration of the sacraments.

[38] See International Theological Commission, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles.*

[39] See Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Inter insigniores* on the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1976), no. 5, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html.

[40] Zagano & Pottier, "Što znamo o đakonisama?" 555.

[41] See Margit Eckholt, "Die Bedeutung des Frauendiakonats für das Werden einer geschwisterlichen Kirche," *Diakonia* 55, no. 3 (2024): 174–82.

[42] See Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), nos. 22, 25, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/hr/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html.

Today, such an understanding of the diaconal ministry is widely accepted.[43] This understanding is also reflected in the concept of the unity of the sacrament of Holy Orders, which should be seen as unity in diversity, and not in a hierarchical order with quantitative increases or decreases of authority. It is a qualitatively differentiated representation of Christ in the word and sacrament on the one hand, and in works of love on the other.[44] Nevertheless, many women who advocate for strengthening the role of women in the Church wonder whether the role of women in the new understanding of the diaconal ministry will only contribute to further clericalization of the Church and further binding of women to roles of ministry. However, based on the statements of women who feel called to the diaconal ministry, it can be observed that they want to restore the original non-clerical meaning of the diaconal ministry in the Church precisely by exercising their own ministry.[45]

Recent Discussions on the Diaconate for Women, Particularly During the Pontificate of Pope Francis

The issue of re-opening the diaconate to women has been the subject of intense pastoral and theological debate over the last decade. In some local Churches, the topic has been discussed for a long time.[46] In the Amazon region of Latin America, for example, it is judged by many to be crucial for the survival of scattered Christian communities. In German-speaking countries, it has been a topic of discussion within Catholic women's organisations and the theology that supports them since the late 1990s.[47] Building on the foundations of the previous, more comprehensive German movement for the diaconate and the movement for women's participation in Church ministries, the Women's Diaconate Network was established in 1997. Between 1999 and 2024, the network carried out three cycles of professional training for Catholic women in diaconal ministry.[48] At their

[43] See Kobusch and Mader-Schömer, "Network Diaconate of Women—Genesis, Goals and Tasks," 7; *Das Gesicht der Kirche im Alltag der Menschen? Der Ort des diakonischen Amtes in einer diakonischen Kirche,* ed. Klaus Kiessling and Verena Wodtke Wernder (Ostfildern: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 2023).

[44] See Kobusch and Mader-Schömer, "Network Diaconate of Women—Genesis, Goals and Tasks," 8.

[45] See Birgit Weiler, "Frauendiakonat wichtiger Schritt—aber mit anderen zusammen" (April 29, 2024), accessed April 30, 2024, https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/52982-weiler-frauendiakonat-wichtiger-schritt-aber-mit-anderen-zusammen; Luca Castiglioni, "Donne cattoliche e ministero ordinato," in *Senza impedimenti. Le donne e il ministero ordinato*, ed. Andrea Grillo (Brescia: Queriniana, 2024), 153.

[46] See Reininger, *Diakonat der Frauen in der Einen Kirche.*

[47] See Eckholt, "Die Bedeutung des Frauendiakonats für das Werden einer geschwisterlichen Kirche," 174–82; Weiler, "Frauendiakonat wichtiger Schritt—aber mit anderen zusammen."

[48] See Kobusch and Mader-Schömer, "Network Diaconate of Women—Genesis, Goals and Tasks," 6–8.

synodal assembly in 2023, the participants at the Synod of the Church in Germany voted in favour of the women's diaconate with a two-thirds majority of bishops.[49]

At the 14th Ordinary General Synod of Bishops on the Family in 2015, the debate was polarized. In 2016, at the request of the International Union of Superiors General, Pope Francis established a study commission on the Diaconate of Women. This commission was tasked with examining the history of the ministry and the role of deaconesses in the Catholic Church, particularly during the early centuries.[50] The report of the commission, however, has not been published, and in response to a journalist's inquiry, the pope stated in May 2019 that the commission had not yet given a definitive answer due to the lack of consensus among its members on the role of deaconesses in early Christianity.[51] Following the special Synod of Bishops for the Amazon, Pope Francis promised to resume the commission's work. However, on 8th April 2020, he established a new commission comprising entirely new members.[52]

At the special Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazonian Region, held in the Vatican in October 2019, the permanent diaconate for women was discussed as a request that had emerged from consultations in the region's churches.[53] However, in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, while acknowledging the gift, strength and contribution of women in proclaiming the Gospel, in catechesis, in distributing baptism and in leading communities, Pope Francis resolutely opposed the admission of women to sacramental ministry. He argued that the request for the participation of women in Holy Orders and in functional structures of the Church would limit perspectives and lead "towards the clericalization

[49] See Margit Eckholt, "Ins weltweite Gespräch um Synodalität eintreten. Der Synodale Weg der römisch-katholischen Kirche in Deutschland im Zusammenhang des weltkirchlichen synodalen Prozesses," *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 132 (2023): 20–23.

[50] See "Istituzione della Commissione di Studio sul Diaconato delle donne," *Sala Stampa della Santa Sede —Bollettino*, August 2, 2016, accessed September 2, 2024, https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2016/08/02/0569/01268.html.

[51] See Joshua J. McElwee, "Francis: Women Deacons Commission Gave Split Report on Their Role in Early Church," *National Catholic Reporter* (May 7, 2019), accessed August 23, 2024, https://www.ncronline.org/vatican/francis-women-deacons-commission-gave-split-report-their-role-early-church.

[52] See Bernadette Mary Reis, "Pope Institutes New Commission to Study Women Deacons," *Vatican News*, April 8, 2020, accessed September 5, 2024, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-04/pope-commission-women-deacons.html.

[53] See Biskupska sinoda—Posebna sinoda za amazonijsko područje, *Amazonija: Novi putevi za Crkvu i za cjelovitu ekologiju. Završni dokument, Vatikan 26. listopada 2019* (Zagreb: Kršćanska sadašnjost, 2020), 103.

of women, diminish the great value of what they have already given and inadvertently cause the impoverishment of their irreplaceable contribution."[54] The pope's view is obviously based on an androcentric theological interpretation that Christ the Bridegroom of the community that celebrates the Eucharist can only be represented by a man.[55]

During the Synod on Synodality (2021–2024), it was observed that episcopal conferences from various parts of the world, as well as continental synodal assemblies from the Middle East, Latin America, Oceania and Europe proposed considering the possibility of a diaconate for women. This was included in the working document prepared as a synthesis of proposals from the base for the first session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, held in 2023, and the topic was discussed.[56] However, as this was one of the issues upon which opinions diverged in the first session of the General Assembly in October 2023,[57] it was removed from the agenda for the second session of the Synod in October 2024.[58]

On 14 July 2024, the pope entrusted the study to a special theological commission established by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. The commission was tasked with studying the participation and leadership of women in the Catholic Church, including the possibility of women's access to the diaconate. The aim was to publish a document on the matter. The commission was also one of ten that provided theological foundations for individual topics at the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod, held in October 2024.[59]

In an interview Pope Francis gave to CBS News anchor Norah O'Donnell, during his appearance on the network's flagship magazine program, *60 Minutes*,

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[54] Francis, *Querida Amazonia* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), no. 100, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html.

[55] See Francis, *Querida Amazonia,* no. 101.

[56] See XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum laboris for the First Session* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), B 2.3, 42, https://www.synod.va/en/the-synodal-process/phase-2-the-discernment-of-the-pastors/the-first-sessionofthe-XVI-assembly/documents.html.

[57] See XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, First Session: *A Synodal Church in Mission: Synthesis Report* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), part 2, chap. 9, j, https://www.synod.va/en/resources/documents/documents-for-the-second-phase/documents-for-the-1st-session-of-the-XVI-assembly/documents.html.

[58] See XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *How to be a Missionary Synodal Church: Instrumentum laboris for the Second Session* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly2024/il/ENG-INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS-A4.pdf.

[59] See Courtney Mares, "Synod Organizer Says Vatican Doctrine Office is Studying Women Deacons," *Catholic News Agency* (July 9, 2024), accessed July 9, 2024, https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/258229/ synod-organizer-says-vatican-doctrine-office-is-studying-women-deacons.

broadcast on May 20 2024, he himself answered her question about whether girls growing up Catholic today "will ever have the opportunity to be deaconesses and participate as members of the clergy in the Church" with a resounding "no." In the ensuing conversation, it became clear that the pope was open to the diaconate for women, but not if it was an integral part of the sacrament of Holy Orders.[60] The pope's explanations were argued by emphasizing and praising the "specific role of women" that is not directed towards ministerial service, and this opinion reflects the pope's consent with the usual concepts of "feminism of difference" and the "feminine mystique" of his predecessors.

The *Final Document* of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, adopted on October 26, 2024, nevertheless leaves the issue of women's access to the diaconate ministry open, stating: "There are no reasons to prevent women from exercising leading roles in the Church: it will not be possible to stop what comes from the Holy Spirit. The question of women's access to the diaconate ministry also remains open and further discernment in this regard should be continued."[61] The aforementioned statement is the fruit of the commitment of women who participated with the right to vote in the Synod on Synodality as delegates and representatives of their communities and as an individual group who, during the general assembly of the Synod in October 2024, requested and were granted a private audience with the Holy Father. At this time, they presented to him their vision of recognizing the role of women in the Church today and in relation to the future.[62] Although this issue of the final document, which the pope accepted and declared to be an integral part of the teaching of the Church's magisterium, received 97 votes "against," which is more than in all the other documents, it was adopted with 258 votes "for," which was a comfortable and more than necessary two-thirds majority.[63]

[60] See Daniel Payne, "Pope Francis on Female Deacons: 'No,'" *Catholic News Agency* (May 21, 2024), accessed September 20, 2024, https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/257757/pope-francis-on-female-deacons-no.

[61] XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), no. 60, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf.

[62] See Luzi Bernet, "Katholische Weltsynode: Zum Schluss halten die Frauen den Fuss in die Tür," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, October 27, 2024, accessed October 27, 2024, https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/katholische-weltsynode-frauen-kaempfen-fuer-gleichberechtigung-im-vatikan-ld.1854138.

[63] See Risultati votazioni Sinodo (October 26, 2024), accessed October 27, 2024, https://press.vatican.va/content/dam/salastampa/it/fuori-bollettino/pdf/Risultati%20Votazioni_Sinodo.pdf.

Conclusion

Given the state of research and contemporary debate, it can be concluded that many authors agree that a re-establishment of the diaconate for women has its foundation in the tradition and practice of the Church of the first millennium, whose preserved testimonies and ordination patterns speak in favour of the sacramentality of this ministry. Contemporary discussions on the theology of diaconate include the re-evaluation of the diaconate in the Church and its foundation in the sacramental representation of Christ the servant, in the Church that serves.

Theological research, however, does not indicate that the form of female diaconate or the figures of deaconesses from the past, their status and the functions they once performed should be reproduced unchanged. On the contrary, research encourages and inspires reflection on a new configuration of the ministry, with new features that respond to new pastoral needs, as well as the urgent recognition of the subjectivity of women in the Church in the 21st century.[64] The diaconate for women would be a strong signal in the direction of such recognition.

Numerous interventions and statements by many theologians and bishops in the context of discussions about the aforementioned topics, and even within the context of the Synod on the Synodality of the Church itself, warn that the exclusion of women from ordained church ministries cannot be justified, especially in the circumstances of the new social, anthropological, and legal culture, for gender does not make baptized women incapable of accessing ordained ministries.[65] Ministries stand in relation to the community, and Christ acts in the Church as a whole through the Holy Spirit. The history of ministries shows that the Church has always understood them in such a dynamic way.[66]

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[64] See Noceti, "Donne e ministero diaconale. Ministero possibile per una nuova Chiesa," 304; Castiglioni, "Donne cattoliche e ministero ordinato," 152, 156; "Bischof Bätzing irritiert über Papst-Aussage gegen Frauenweihe" (May 28, 2024.), accessed September 8, 2024, https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/53622-bischof-baetzing-irritiert-ueber-papst-aussage-gegen-frauenweihe.

[65] See Andrea Grillo, "Senza l'autorità di ammettere o senza l'autorità di escludere?" in *Senza impedimenti. Le donne e il ministero ordinato*, ed. Andrea Grillo (Brescia: Queriniana, 2024), 181–182; "Wiesemann: Diakonat der Frau wäre Signal, dass es Bewegung gibt," *Katholisch.de*, November 7, 2024, accessed November 7, 2024, https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/57336-wiesemann-diakonat-der-frau-waere-signal-dass-es-bewegung-gibt; Weiler, "Frauendiakonat wichtiger Schritt—aber mit anderen zusammen"; "Weltsynode: Bätzing macht sich für Frauendiakonat stark," *Katholisch.de*, October 20, 2024, accessed October 20, 2024, https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/56904-weltsynode-baetzing-macht-sich-fuer-frauen-diakonat-stark

[66] See Gilles Routhier, "Pensare con il Vaticano II l'ammissione delle cristiane al diaconato," in *Diacone. Quale ministero per quale Chiesa?* ed. Serena Noceti (Brescia: Queriniana, 2017), 28–35; Noceti, "Donne e ministero diaconale. Ministero possibile per una nuova Chiesa," 303–304.

Given the unimaginably long centuries of subordination, exclusion and silencing of women, which was shaped by clericalism in the Church, and has for a long time alienated many Christian women from the Church, one should not expect immediate miracles even when the diaconate is opened to women. The act itself would, however, be a strong sign and a major step for the future of the Church and for the credibility of its mission.[67]

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[67] This chapter is a shortened version of a more extensive article: Ana Thea Filipović, "Women and the Diaconate: The State of the Discussion in the Catholic Church," in *Feminist Theology: Thought and Practice in Central and Eastern European Contexts. Collection of Papers*, ed. Katica Knezović, Ksenija Magda, Irena Sever Globan and Bruna Velčić (Zagreb: European Society of Women in Theological Research—Croatian Section & Teološki fakultet "Matija Vlačić Ilirik," 2025): 329–53.

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Part III. Formation, Pastoral Practice, and Lived Faith

Can Selected Insights from Academic Didactics Contribute to Reconceptualizing Priestly Formation?

The Polish Context

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Abstract

A striking indicator of the shift in religious attitudes in Poland can be seen in the declining number of young men entering seminaries to discern their vocation. Recognizing these dynamics as a sign of the times implies a need for renewal in priestly formation. This chapter examines whether selected insights from modern academic didactics can contribute to reconceptualizing priestly formation in the current Polish context—because modern academic didactics illuminate the complexity, the supports, and the obstacles of adult-learning processes. It equips educators with knowledge for conscious planning and for creating optimal conditions for a growth-mindset, in which students themselves play the key and active role. The possible impact of modern academic didactics on reconceptualizing priestly formation is examined in this chapter with reference to the intellectual and human dimensions of formation. Applying insights from Bloom's taxonomy can support the formulation of syllabi oriented toward higher-order skills, given that moving beyond mere knowledge transmission and developing competencies necessary for contextualized pastoral work is crucial. The human dimension could benefit if the formation programs in seminaries are influenced by the concept of constructive alignment—illustrated here with regard to freedom and the attitude of docility. Finally, both locally and worldwide, regular, scientific evaluation of priestly formation to determine whether its objectives are being met is indispensable. This could boost the sharing of best-practice formation examples among particular Churches, thus contributing to synodal hearing and learning processes within the Church.

Keywords: priestly formation; academic didactics; Poland; Bloom's taxonomy; constructive alignment; *Ratio institutionis sacerdotalis*; synodality.

Current Vocation Situation in Poland in the Context of Shifts in Religiosity

Amid all the concerns and challenges facing the Catholic faith in Europe,[1] even countries often regarded as unshaken in terms of religiosity and ties to the Catholic Church are now confronting similar phenomena (e.g., secularization) as their Western neighbours. Poland undoubtedly stands out among European societies in terms of certain undeniable shifts in trends. This is all the more striking given that these processes are occurring in a society profoundly shaped by Catholicism over centuries—one that became the country's dominant Christian denomination after World War II due to border changes and a large group of (mainly Orthodox) citizens remaining in territories incorporated into the Soviet Union. In fact, the dramatic decline in various indicators of religious life and personal piety point to fundamental changes underway in Polish society. This is especially true for young adults, whose relationship with the Catholic Church is hardly comparable to that of their parents' or grandparents' generations.[2] Clear signs of this trend, already visible before the COVID-19 pandemic, have only accelerated since.[3]

A striking symptom of this profound shift in religious attitudes can be seen in the number of young men entering seminaries to discern their vocation and eventually become priests. The downward trend in these numbers is not surprising; what is remarkable is its velocity. Hard data leaves no room for sugarcoating, even when accounting for persistently low fertility rates and Poland's demographic decline.[4] Whereas there were 6,789 seminarians across all types of seminaries in Poland in 2000, by 2024 the number had dropped by 5,000 to just 1,690. The overall trend in applications to diocesan seminaries from 2018 to 2024 was −50.4%.[5] In some dioceses, the decline during this period can only be described

[1] See Giacomo Costa, ed., *The Final Document of the Continental Assembly of the Synod on Synodality* (Prague: Council of the European Bishops' Conferences, 2023), 14–17.

[2] "In Poland, there has been a slow decline in declarations of faith and a more rapid decline in religious practice, although this decline in religiosity has been uneven: it has progressed most rapidly among the youngest people (aged 18–24), residents of large cities, and better-educated individuals," in Marta Bożewicz, ed., *Religijność Polaków* (Warszawa: Fundacja CBOS, 2024), 6 [Translation mine].

[3] Results of a 2018 Pew Research Center study showed that young adults (aged 18–39) in Poland were 23 percentage points less likely than older adults (aged 40+) to consider religion very important in their lives. The age gap in worship attendance in the same sample was the largest among the 108 countries surveyed, at –29 percentage points. See Pew Research Center, *The Age Gap in Religion Around the World* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2018).

[4] In Poland, the total fertility rate stood at 1.099 births per woman in 2024, compared to 1.991 in 1990. See Justyna Gustyn, ed., *Polska w liczbach 2025* (Warszawa: Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2025), 3.

[5] This extreme trend is consistent with the overall picture, as the decline in the number of seminarians is a worldwide phenomenon and has been uninterrupted since 2012. According to the Vatican News summary of the *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae* 2023, the largest annual decline in major seminarians between 2022 and 2023 occurred in Europe

as a collapse (Gliwice: −90.5%; Opole: −80.8%; Wrocław: −77.6%).[6] Due to a lack of applicants, numerous seminaries have had to restructure. Bishops in several dioceses (Gliwice, Gniezno, Kalisz, Bydgoszcz, Łowicz, Legnica, Świdnica, Bielsko-Biała) have decided to send their seminarians to other major seminaries to ensure their formation.[7] Thus, the analysis of recent dynamics in priestly vocations by Pawlina in his study *New Shepherds. Priestly Vocations in the Catholic Church in Poland between 2000 and 2022* addresses a highly challenging socio-religious context with turbulent prospects for the Church and priestly vocations.[8] Pawlina remains cautiously optimistic: "We do not know what the future will bring, but the change in the manner of education and formation of future priests and the adaptation of the study programme to the challenges of the new times—and this is what the reformed *Ratio* [*institutionis sacerdotalis pro Polonia*; BW] assumes—will certainly contribute to the harmonious and proper development of new priests."[9]

(−4.9%). See Vatican News, "New Church Statistics Reveal Growing Catholic Population, Fewer Pastoral Workers," April 20, 2025, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2025-03/pontifical-yearbook-2025-priests-religious-statistics.html.

[6] In the same period, the seminaries of the Archdiocese of Łódź and of the Military Ordinariate of Poland were the only two in Poland to experience growth in candidates (respectively: +59.5% and +40%). See Luiza Organek, Marcin Jewdokimow et al., *Kościół w liczbach. Dane za rok 2024* (Warszawa: ISKK, 2025), 13.

[7] See Piotr Kot and Łukasz Kasper, "Powołania do kapłaństwa," *Kościół w Polsce. Raport 2023* (Warszawa: KAI-IDMN, 2023), 68.

[8] One of the most important elements of the current mindset regarding the priestly vocation as an existential decision and its lived reality in Poland is undoubtedly the crisis of trust in bishops, stemming from negligence in prosecuting and preventing sexual abuse. This is particularly evident in the current (February 2026) paralysis of the Polish Bishops' Conference, which remains undecided on whether to convene a central clarifying commission for all Polish dioceses or not. The ongoing stalemate only further highlights latest decisions of individual bishops to establish such commissions in their own dioceses (Łódź, Sosnowiec, Częstochowa).

[9] Krzysztof Pawlina, *New Shepherds: Priestly Vocations in the Catholic Church in Poland between 2000 and 2022. A Sociological Study* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2025), 41. Pawlina's study is unique thus far in terms of its targeted level of complexity, scope, and reference to empirical data. Other selected recent publications on priestly formation in Poland or specific aspects of RISP: Ryszard Selejdak, "Formacja kandydatów," *Collectanea Theologica* 87, no. 3 (2017): 97–133; Łukasz Plata, "Dojrzałość uczuciowa" (PhD diss., University of Lublin, 2019); Jolanta Kurosz and Tomasz Wielebski, "Formacja pastoralnoteologiczna," *Teologia i Człowiek* 56, no. 4 (2021): 95–112; Michał Mraczek, "Etap propedeutyczny" *Polonia Sacra* 26 (2022): 155–70; Paweł Rabczyński, "Główne idee" *Studia Warmińskie* 60 (2023): 281–98.

Aim, Scope, and Limitations of This Chapter

Three aspects of Pawlina's statement merit particular attention. First, the current state of priestly vocations constitutes a compelling phenomenon and can rightly be interpreted as a distinctive *signum temporis* for the Catholic Church in Poland. Second, recognizing these dynamics as such a sign necessarily implies a need for renewal in priestly formation, a topic developed further below. Third, any reflection or proposal for modifying the existing model of priestly formation must consider the most recent normative document on the subject: the *Ratio Institutionis Sacerdotalis pro Polonia* (RISP), which entered into force *ad experimentum* on 1 October 2021 for a five-year period (RISP, 1).[10] It was formulated in response to the latest universal normative document, *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis*, issued by the then Congregation for the Clergy on 8 December 2016.

This chapter builds on these three premises. Its aim is to examine whether selected insights from modern academic didactics can contribute to reconceptualizing priestly formation for the current Polish context. Here, priestly formation is understood in the broad sense of ongoing formation—that which begins *before* and continues *after* ordination (see RISP 70). At the same time, this chapter harbours no simplistic illusion of offering quick fixes that could foreseeably reverse declining vocation numbers and revitalize the Church. Decisions to enter a seminary (which in no way commit one to ordination) arise from a complex matrix of factors, including family background, chosen friendships and acquaintances, educational and work experiences, cultural trends, sociological settings, media influence, high mobility, and—crucially—personal experiences of faith and the Church.[11] In this regard, certain obstacles to giving oneself and ecclesial structures a chance to discern one's vocation together and officially are "ecclesiogenic," i.e., church-induced. In other words, the difficulties to pursuing one's vocation are not to be searched for solely *outside* the Church in modern culture, mentality, etc.[12] Thus, the following sections should not be seen as a cure-all for

[10] Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Ratio institutionis* (Warszawa, 2021).

[11] See chapters 2–6 of Pawlina's study, which characterize various factors influencing candidates for the ministry (Pawlina, *New Shepherds*, 43–212).

[12] The ambivalence of the so-called "vocational culture" (see RISP 121–141) is meant here. It exemplifies what is meant by ecclesiogenic obstacles to a positive decision for official vocational discernment. Some asymmetry can be observed in debates about the decline of priestly vocations, with a focus on *external* factors contributing to this trend more than on *internal* ones. Church officials' appeals to families to foster fundamental openness to spiritual vocations do not necessarily align with the everyday reality of priestly formation in seminaries and contrast with a lack of creating positive yet serious understanding of priesthood among the youth. Moreover, once a candidate enters a seminary, he encounters living conditions that are less supportive to his discernment than one might expect. In other words, it is valid to ask: what kind of vocational culture exists *within* the Church's institutional structures that, in turn, calls for more effort toward "vocational

the challenges facing the Catholic Church in Poland. Their potential could unfold only as part of a holistic vision of measures and steps—a genuine strategy for the Church's presence in Poland amid current conditions. Even then, one must reckon with Loffeld's doubts in regard to "optimization and transformation paradigms," i.e., the notion that a new Church reality will emerge simply through adequate steps and improvement strategies.[13] Can one truly assume that revising the Church's strategy, agenda, and presence in modern Europe will lead to a renewal of faith? Is this a theologically viable idea?

Need for Contextualized Actualization of Conciliar Documents on Priestly Formation

Given the aim and scope of this chapter, it is essential to emphasize the need for adjustments and revisions to priestly formation over the decades since the Second Vatican Council's documents on the issue: *Optatam totius* (OT) and *Presbyterorum ordinis*.[14] Due to the wide variety of challenges, fears, and hopes in particular Churches worldwide, only general laws on priestly formation have been deemed feasible at the universal level. Each country or rite must develop a specific "program of priestly training," which should moreover be "revised from time to time" so that "the universal laws [will] be adapted to the particular circumstances of the times and localities" (OT 1). On the 60th anniversary of both conciliar decrees, Pope Leo XIV issued his apostolic letter *A Fidelity that Generates the Future*, in which he resolutely takes up this call for revisions. As the People of God journeys through history, without an anchor in any particular era but solely anchored in Christ, the ongoing experience of change "requires constant evaluation of the path taken and a consistent deepening of the Council's teachings" (*A Fidelity* 4).[15] The Pontiff is convinced that the sexual abuse crisis and the resulting loss of trust have made it even clearer how critical it is to provide "a comprehensive formation that

culture"? For more on this, see Bartłomiej Warowny, "Es wird anders sein. Es kann besser sein! Anmerkungen zur Lage und Erneuerung der katholischen Kirche in Polen," *ET-Studies* 15, no. 2 (2024): 237–54, https://doi.org/10.2143/ETS.15.2.3293555.

[13] Jan Loffeld, *Wenn nichts fehlt, wo Gott fehlt* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2024), 21–24.

[14] Second Vatican Council, *Optatam totius: Decree on Priestly Training* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_optatam-totius_en.html; Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum ordinis: Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_presbyterorum-ordinis_en.html.

[15] The two conciliar decrees are not only to be implemented but also actualized. See Leo XIV, *A Fidelity That Generates the Future: Apostolic Letter on the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Conciliar Decrees Optatam totius and Presbyterorum ordinis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2025), no. 27, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/apost_letters/documents/20251208-una-fedelta.html.

ensures the personal growth and maturity of candidates for the priesthood, together with a rich and solid spiritual life" (*A Fidelity* 10). A particular criterion for evaluating the fruitfulness of the Church's pastoral practices is the decline in priestly vocations, taking into account the variety of possible reasons depending on local contexts (*A Fidelity* 28).

The current situation of priestly vocations in Poland is undoubtedly a *signum temporis* calling for an examination of formation programs.[16] This examination concerns not only the concepts of priestly formation already in place but also the extent to which the reality of formation—beyond mere paper plans—is being *lived* and evaluated. It thus implies a need for proper (objective and scientific) regular evaluation of the current state of formation, which has not yet been undertaken in Poland. In seeking to actualize and renew the conceptualization of priestly formation, it is plausible and appropriate to draw inspiration from modern academic didactics, which understand the complexity of adult learning processes, what supports them, and what hinders them. It equips educators with knowledge for conscious planning and creating optimal conditions for a growth mindset, in which students themselves play the key and active role. Teachers reflect on their role in light of the context, intended learning outcomes, and assessment, ensuring their approach supports student development. In this vein, there are multiple areas where paradigms, observations, and results from modern academic didactics could fruitfully inform priestly formation. Moreover, it was the firm conviction of the Council Fathers that the Church is not only called to influence the world positively but the Church herself acknowledges "how richly she has profited by the history and development of humanity."[17] Due to her visible and social structure, the Church "can and ought to be enriched by the development of human social life, not that there is any lack in the constitution given her by Christ, but that she can understand it more penetratingly, express it better, and adjust it more

[16] With this statement, I expand on Pawlina's perspective in his study. Changes in seminary formation are indeed due to *signa temporis* or local needs, but they should not only be assessed against the situation and demands of future priests and those they serve. The current condition of the Church herself—reflected by the People of God and academic theology—must also be considered as a factor indicating necessary changes. It is true that, legally, a single bishops' conference cannot introduce changes contradicting general norms. Yet it is the responsibility and duty of all bishops to support the Pontiff in co-exercising his authority by thoroughly analyzing *signa temporis* also within the Church's structures and suggesting issues in priestly formation that may require change, completion, or development. In this context, Pawlina's statement—"If changes to the existing model of formation are undertaken, it is only because the Church obliges us to do so"—leads directly to the current debate on the synodal Church, emphasizing the relevance of local contexts, dynamics, and the irremovable responsibility of each particular Church. See Pawlina, *New Shepherds*, 30.

[17] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes* (GS): *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), no. 44, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

successfully to our times" (GS 44). Thus, reflection on the potential fruitfulness of dialogue between priestly formation and academic didactics has solid foundations.

Possible Impact of Modern Academic Didactics on Conceptualizing Priestly Formation

a) Intellectual Dimension

The intellectual dimension of priestly formation is the most obvious area for insights from modern academic didactics. One might argue that, especially since the Bologna Reform, there should be no need for such enrichment, as the reform itself emphasizes competence-centred education over mere knowledge transmission. Ideally, this should already be the case. However, without regular scientific evaluation to determine whether the objectives of priestly formation are being met, no naive assumptions should be made.

The demands and challenges facing theologians today—particularly those preparing for ordination—are immense. Profound knowledge of the history of theology and dogma alone is no longer sufficient to accompany the brothers and sisters a priest is called to serve in their everyday challenges. Pastoral ministry and responsibility for one's words and actions require solid theological training. Pope Francis' apostolic letter *Ad theologiam promovendam* (ATP) is definitive in this regard, calling for an epistemological and methodological rethinking in theology (see ATP 3).[18] According to the pope, theology must be more deeply rooted in its context (see ATP 4) and avoid self-referential isolation. In a Church seeking to live synodality, theology should pursue transdisciplinarity (see ATP 5–6).

If theology is more than "repeat[ing] the formulae and acts that derive from the thinking of past times" (ATP 1), then formulating and implementing syllabi according to Bloom's revised taxonomy—a hierarchical system for categorizing educational goals—could be remarkably productive.[19] This taxonomy progresses from lower-order skills ("remembering" and "understanding") through "applying" and "analyzing" to the highest levels: "evaluating" and "creating." Given that seminary formation is oriented toward pastoral practice, seminarians must intentionally be taught and encouraged to engage theology at these upper levels.

[18] Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html.

[19] Lorin W. Anderson and David R. Krathwohl, eds., *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2001).

Otherwise, they will not be adequately prepared for contemporary needs.[20] Neither mere recall of information nor even competence in application suffices for contextualized pastoral work; it demands the ability to evaluate existing pastoral models and create new ones.[21] "Those who are trained to be priests do not devote time to academia for the sake of mere erudition, but out of fidelity to their vocation. Intellectual work, especially theological work, is a form of love and service, necessary for the mission."[22] As noted earlier, there is no evidence that precisely this kind of intellectual formation is intentionally taking place in Polish seminaries today. On the contrary, the faithful have expressed concerns about clergy lacking necessary competencies and attitudes in the local synthesis of the Synod on Synodality.[23]

b) Human Dimension

The human dimension of priestly formation could also benefit significantly from insights drawn from modern academic didactics. Strong indications suggest that confronting this dimension with academic didactic principles could actualize thinking about priestly vocations (*A Fidelity* 27). An indicator is the situation of this dimension in the predecessor to the RISP, the *Ratio institutionis* from 1999. Pawlina noted that the intellectual dimension was particularly emphasized in that document, and the pastoral element was adequately addressed. The other two dimensions, however, were somewhat neglected: "Worse is the case of spiritual and human formation. It is true that *Ratio* gives a general vision of this formation, but the means and methods of implementation are lacking. For example, a lot of attention is given in regard to how to educate toward freedom. But how to do this?

[20] It is noteworthy that in universal norms on priestly formations issued in 2016, multiple separate points refer to the need for various forms of critical discernment competence. See Congregation for the Clergy, *Ratio Fundamentalis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), 117, 120, 153, 170, https://www.clerus.va/content/dam/clerus/documenti/ratio-2026/Ratio-EN-2017-01-03.pdf; see Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Ratio institutionis* (2021), 399, 471.

[21] See RISP 24, 104, 125, 146.

[22] Leo XIV, *Letter to the Archdiocesan Major Seminary "San Carlos e San Marcello" of Trujillo on the Occasion of the Four Hundredth Anniversary of Its Foundation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2025), https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/letters/2025/documents/20250917-lettera-seminario-trujillo.html. See also Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam*, no. 8.

[23] "Among the proposals that were made were the following: the need for proper catechesis for adults, the development of pastoral care that responds to the authentic needs of the faithful, and the strengthening (or building from scratch) of pastoral care for children, young people, families, and the elderly (…). There is an urgent need to provide pastoral care for people who remain on the peripheries of the Church. It is therefore important to be able to discern the spiritual needs of parishioners." See Łukasz Kasper, "Struktura diecezjalna," *Kościół w Polsce. Raport 2023* (Warszaw: KAI-IDMN, 2023), 51 [Translation mine].

How to reconcile freedom with discipline in seminaries? Much attention is paid to human formation, but how to conduct it?"[24] Meanwhile, the relevance of competencies in precisely these two areas is growing every year. Facing the challenge of solitude and difficulties in building relationships, "it is precisely priests who are called to respond effectively to the great hunger for authentic and sincere relationships that is found in contemporary society through the witness of a modest and chaste life" (*A Fidelity* 26). Respective needs in the Polish context—and the concurrent lack of adequate competencies and comportment among priests—found expression in the local synthesis of the Synod on Synodality.[25] It is therefore plausible to explore potential benefits for the human dimension of priestly formation from modern academic didactics. Pawlina's mention of lacking means and methods for seminarians' education in freedom provides a valid starting point for this section.

The relevance of recognizing freedom in the formation process is stressed in RISP 104. Yet one could rightly ask: how should seminarians learn to develop and live freedom? In developing a concrete formation program for a particular seminary, the concept of *constructive alignment* could prove helpful.[26] Its structure combines three elements: a detailed description of learning objectives (where Bloom's taxonomy, mentioned above, offers major support); teaching-learning activities (i.e., what students must do during the learning process to achieve the objectives); and assessment (i.e., how it can be observed or verified whether the objectives have been reached).

[24] Pawlina, *New Shepherds*, 30.

[25] "There was very clear criticism of priests, resulting primarily from our own parish experiences. We perceive the pastor as an absent and uninvolved person, but at the same time we are aware that we need him very much and seek guides on the paths of our faith. Our attitude towards priests clearly reveals the tension between expectations and desires on the one hand and unpleasant realities on the other," the document reads. Lay people criticized priests for their lack of genuine piety, materialism, violation of moral principles, insensitivity to people's needs, and poor relations with the parish and local community, according to the national summary." See Kasper, "Struktura diecezjalna," 50–51 [Translation mine]. On the other hand, Pope Leo emphasizes the importance of both human maturity and spiritual solidity for priestly life: "Only priests and consecrated persons who are humanly mature and spiritually solid—in other words, those in whom the human and spiritual dimensions are well integrated and who are therefore capable of authentic relationships with everyone—can take on the commitment of celibacy and credibly proclaim the Gospel of the Risen One" (Leo XIV, A Fidelity 12).

[26] For more details on constructive alignment, see John Biggs, "Enhancing Teaching Through Constructive Alignment," *Higher Education* 32 (1996): 347–64, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00138871; John Biggs, "Constructive Alignment in University Teaching," *HERDSA Review of Higher Education*, vol. 1 (2014): 5–22. Due to differing approaches to introducing Biggs' concept, a discussion has arisen; see C. Loughlin, S. Lygo-Baker, and Å. Lindberg-Sand, "Reclaiming constructive alignment," *European Journal of Higher Education* 11, no. 2 (2021): 119–36.

Transposing this to seminarian formation: When drafting a seminary formation program (see RISP 10), those responsible should describe how lived and embodied Christian freedom is to be understood in their specific context. The highest skill levels—evaluation and creation—pose a fascinating challenge with regard to freedom, reaching deeply into the core of Christian identity and existence.[27] Furthermore, those responsible should develop a list of teaching-learning activities suited to the particular stage of formation and mindful of its progressivity (see RISP 263). These activities must be present across every dimension of formation (spiritual, intellectual, pastoral, missionary), as no single activity can lead to mature and responsible freedom. Constant growth in freedom implies having influence over one's own formation path—as much as possible to endure for both candidates and formators (see RISP 87, 111, 200, 358). Awareness of the formation structure combined with maximum possible autonomy within it holds great potential for accompanied growth in responsible and creative freedom. If seminarians are granted autonomy to freely choose 30% of their ECTS points in courses, why could they not be granted at least comparable freedom and influence over teaching-learning activities in other dimensions (see RISP 411)? In this context it is a valid question whether control mechanisms in seminaries truly support the formation and ensure personal growth and maturity (see *A Fidelity* 10). Pawlina's question about the extent of "discipline" in seminaries here confronts the need for a new model of leadership—one that is increasingly collegial, where priests do not seek "to dominate or take on all tasks themselves" (see *A Fidelity* 20–22).

Finally, at the most creative level of using one's freedom lies the competence of level-headed self-assessment. Suitable self-reflection templates could be developed to support seminarians in personal observations, shared and discussed with spiritual directors or other specialists as needed. This could take the form of detailed evaluation templates tailored to the individual's formation stage, as advised in RISP 339. Moreover, enriching the conceptualization of priestly formation with didactic insights could better recognize the need for formation adapted to each individual seminarian. The decline in seminarian numbers in Poland poses not only a challenge but also an opportunity for greater sensitivity to the needs and potential of every candidate (see RISP 47, 59, 86, 94–97, 113). Efforts to unlearn individualism and foster a sense of community in view of priestly ministry do not mean losing one's individuality. As Pope Leo stressed: nothing of the seminarian's personal uniqueness "should be put aside; rather, everything should be taken up and transformed, like the grain of wheat in the Gospel.

[27] It is due to the richness and depth of Christian freedom: how it can be lived and what prophetic, transformative potential it reveals when lived in precisely this way. See Paul Klein, "Der Stellenwert der 'kreativen Freiheit,'" in *In libertatem vocati estis*, ed. H. Boelaars and R. Tremblay (Rome: Institutum Superius Theologiae Moralis Pontificiae Universitati Lateranensi Insertum, 1977), 79–99.

The goal is to become a joyful man and a joyful priest, a 'bridge,' not an obstacle for those who come to you in order to come to Christ."[28]

Another inspiration for developing human competencies in priestly formation can be found in Pope Leo's letter *A Fidelity*. In appreciating the anniversary of the two major conciliar documents by framing priestly ministry in terms of fidelity, he also stresses the need for priests' ongoing conversion (*A Fidelity* 7–9). Beyond the fundamental Christian spiritual attitude toward daily comportment, he underscores perpetual formation implying lifelong learning—including of their understanding of ministry. It is a particular emphasis of the Pontiff, indicating his precise awareness that a synodal style of priestly ministry cannot be imposed from above, when he reiterates his desire to "invite priests … somehow to open their hearts and take part in [synodal; BW] processes. (…) It appears essential that, in all the particular Churches, appropriate initiatives be undertaken so that priests can familiarize themselves with the guiding principles of this Document and experience the fruitfulness of a synodal style of Church" (*A Fidelity* 21).[29] What is meant here is an exemplification of the competence of *docility*. This is one of the absolutely fundamental Christian competencies concerning following Christ and being his disciples—the main thread of Christian faith and vocation, referring above all to ordained ministers (*A Fidelity* 9). They must never forget being disciples themselves throughout life. This requires fostering a deep conviction of the necessity of manifold processes of cognitive flexibility, openness, and willingness expressed in learning, re-learning, unlearning, and learning anew. This understanding aligns with ongoing intellectual formation (see RISP

[28] Leo XIV, *Meditation on the Occasion of the Jubilee of Seminarians* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2025), https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2025/june/documents/20250624-giubileo-seminaristi.html. Similarly, should "the charisms or talents that the Lord has granted to each" priest be respected. "[P]riestly communion can never be established by the standardization" (Leo XIV, *A Fidelity* 18).

[29] As a further step following the First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, the Final Report of Study Group no. 4 on "The Revision of the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* in a Missionary Synodal Perspective" was released on March 3, 2026. One section of this document stresses the need for conversion in priestly formation, opening the perspective not only to "appropriate updates of the formative community of the Seminary" but also to preparing "other formative 'places/times' necessary for education in mission and synodality. If this conversion also concerns the structural side of the Church's formative responsibility, it is good to develop pathways to the priesthood in which the 'Seminary' is not the sole place for formation." See General Secretariat of the Synod, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission. Study Group No. 4: The Revision of the Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis from a Synodal Missionary Perspective* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2026), no. 12, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/process/implementation/10working-groups/final-reports/sg4/SG-4_ENG_Final-Report.pdf.

399), which in a Christian context implies implementation and ongoing conversion. What has been acknowledged as good becomes an obligation and leads to action. This now points toward a more synodal perception of ordained ministry. No one can predict what exigencies priests will face in another 60 years after the publication of the conciliar documents on priestly formation. One thing is clear: fostering the competence of docility will be necessary to meet the challenges of the time and serve in fidelity that generates the future. Thus, drafting a competence development structure for *docility* represents a further step in deeply enriching priestly formation through modern academic didactics.

Conclusion

a) Results

The aim of this chapter was to examine whether selected insights from modern academic didactics can contribute to conceptualizing priestly formation in the current Polish context. A valid premise for this reflection is the state of priestly vocations in Poland, which constitutes a compelling phenomenon and—given the statistical data—may rightly be interpreted as a distinctive *signum temporis* for the Catholic Church in Poland. Confronting selected insights from modern academic didactics with Poland's normative document on priestly formation (RISP) reveals multiple advantages for conceptualizing formation, understood here in the broad sense as ongoing formation *before* and *after* ordination.

This chapter does not intend to offer quick fixes that could reverse the downward trend in candidate numbers, which would reflect an oversimplified view of religious reality in Poland and Europe. Its findings show that intellectual formation could benefit if professors intentionally applied Bloom's taxonomy and clearly communicated the importance of higher-order skills to seminarians. In the perspective of their pastoral work, bishops should intentionally express that the highest levels of competencies are expected and appreciate such engagement accordingly.

The human dimension could likewise profit if the concept of constructive alignment informed formation programs in specific seminaries—as illustrated here with regard to freedom and toward the competence of docility. At the same time, the chapter highlights the need for regular evaluation of RISP's implementation in Poland across different levels and dimensions of formation. This urgency is heightened by the five-year *ad experimentum* period, which expires in 2026.

b) Outlook

This raises the logical question of worldwide scientific evaluation of priestly formation: Are its objectives being met globally? At first glance, such a question

might suggest an "efficiency-oriented mentality, whereby the value of each person is measured by performance, that is, by the quantity of activities and projects accomplished" (*A Fidelity* 24). Yet it concerns neither the value of those engaged in priestly formation nor the quantity of activities accomplished, but rather the fruits the Lord may expect and the fruitfulness of the Church's practices, which the pope encourages us to examine (*A Fidelity* 1, 28).

Therefore, evaluation criteria for priestly formation programs could be carefully elaborated so that the sheer number of seminarians does not determine one's success. Would it not be helpful, however, to evaluate, examine, and recognize formators who excel in their work? One could envision a Global Formators Prize—analogous to the Global Teacher Prize—awarded to formator teams based on criteria other than mere efficiency. Their ideas and experiences could serve as an impulse for reflection and inspiration in other particular Churches.

Furthermore, evaluating ongoing formation *after* ordination could foster vocations. A concrete example lies in worldwide evaluation of priestly fraternity, to which Pope Leo devotes an entire section in *A Fidelity* (14–19). It "should be considered a constitutive element of the identity of ministers, not as a mere ideal or slogan, but as an aspect to be pursued with renewed vigor" (*A Fidelity* 16). Its importance is reiterated in the RISP (RISP 359). But is it merely a postulate, or can priests truly rely on their bishops and one another? First, what is the state of fraternal bonds among bishops themselves? Second, what is the quality of bonds between bishops and priests? Third, what is the condition of bonds among priests? On one hand, the pontiff underscores the importance of these bonds; on the other, he subtly identifies problems, indicating their deficient quality: clear economic inequalities exist among priests, and in several dioceses, ill or elderly priests lack adequate support (*A Fidelity* 15–16). Moreover, the pope notes priests' heightened exposure to loneliness, especially in the West, where "priests are no longer part of a cohesive and believing community that, in the past, supported their ministry" (*A Fidelity* 17). Remarkably positive is his stance on priests leaving ministry, which transcends legalism, calls for care and compassion, and remains open to the variety of personal histories "and the many reasons that may have led them to such a decision" (*A Fidelity* 11)—far removed from blanket judgment. Thus, the pope himself exemplifies a deeply fraternal attitude that can serve as a guiding inspiration above all for bishops but also for other priests, opening the perspective of bonds that extend beyond the here and now and call for fidelity in fraternity toward sacramentally ordained brothers even after leaving ministry.

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Religious Doubts and Emotions Towards God in Adolescents:

Their Role in Identity and Faith Development

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Abstract

Religious doubts and emotions toward God represent an important dimension of adolescent spirituality, shaping both personal development and psychological well-being. This chapter explores how doubt, frequently emerging during processes of identity formation, can become a space for deeper faith development, openness, and meaning-making rather than a sign of religious decline. Drawing on empirical findings from research conducted among Czech adolescents, the study shows that while reflective questioning may support spiritual growth, unresolved doubts accompanied by negative emotions such as guilt, anger, or fear may increase psychological distress, particularly in unsupportive religious environments. The findings underline the importance of contexts that allow open dialogue, critical reflection, and supportive accompaniment in religious education and pastoral practice. The chapter further reflects on how theological interpretation and pastoral engagement can foster environments in which adolescents can explore existential questions and integrate doubt into a mature, personally appropriated faith.

Keywords: religious doubt; adolescence; emotions towards God; religious identity; faith development; religious and spiritual struggles.

The religious situation in Europe is today frequently interpreted through the categories of secularisation or religious decline. However, a growing body of contemporary research suggests that the issue is not merely a quantitative decrease in religiosity, but rather a transformation in the very manner of believing. Faith is no longer a self-evident cultural framework transmitted across generations; instead, it increasingly becomes a matter of individual interpretation and personal

decision-making.[1] Likewise, the religious identity of young people is formed less through institutional continuity and more through personal meaning-making within a pluralistic and ideologically fragmented environment. This transformation becomes particularly visible during adolescence, a stage developmental psychology has long recognised as crucial for identity formation.[2] With the development of abstract thinking and increasing autonomy, young people begin to reflect on previously implicit moral and religious assumptions and confront them with personal experience, social plurality, and existential questions concerning suffering and justice.[3] Faith thus gradually shifts from the level of shared cultural self-evidence to that of individual interpretation. Alongside this process of reflection, doubts about one's religious grounding or faith itself may emerge, often accompanying the transition from inherited to reflective belief.

Empirical research on religious doubt confirms this developmental trajectory. Longitudinal studies indicate that experiences of doubt constitute a common aspect of adolescent religious development and are closely related to processes of identity exploration.[4] In this context, Puffer et al. argue that doubt is more often associated with active identity searching than with identity disintegration.[5] At the same time, the impact of doubt is not unambiguous: while reflective questioning may foster integrative thinking and deeper existential orientation, doubt experienced as illegitimate or socially isolated tends to be associated with anxiety, shame, and gradual disengagement from religious environments.[6]

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[1] Roger Jensen, *Whatever Happened to the Paragon? Secularization and Religious Change in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2021); David Voas and Mark Chaves, "Is the United States a Counterexample to the Secularization Thesis?" *American Journal of Sociology* 121, no. 5 (2016): 1517–56, https://doi.org/10.1086/684202; José Pereira Coutinho, "Religiously Unaffiliated Youth in Europe: Shifting Remnants of Belief and Practice in Contexts of Diffused Religion and Cohort Decline," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 63, no. 2 (2024): 379–97.

[2] Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968).

[3] Pamela Ebstyne King and Robert W. Roeser, "Religion and Spirituality in Adolescent Development," in *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*, ed. Richard M. Lerner and Laurence Steinberg (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2009), 435–78; Sam A. Hardy et al., "Adolescent Religiousness and Spirituality: Meaning-Making, Identity, and Well-Being," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 29, no. 3 (2019): 1–15.

[4] Bruce Hunsberger, Christopher Pratt, and Michael Pancer, "Religious Doubt: A Social Psychological Analysis," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 3 (2002): 523–38; Anikó Kézdy and Thomas Boland, "Religious Doubt and Identity Formation," *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 31, no. 2 (2009): 215–36.

[5] Keith A. Puffer et al., "Religious Doubt and Identity Formation: Salient Predictors of Adolescent Religious Doubt," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 36, no. 4 (2008): 270–84. https://doi.org/10.1177/009164710803600403.

[6] Julie J. Exline and E. Rose, "Religious and Spiritual Struggles," in *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, ed. Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), 315–30; Neal Krause and Keith M. Wulff, "Religious Doubt and Health," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 4 (2004): 559–69; Hisham

A similar shift can also be observed in contemporary reflections on faith itself, which is no longer understood merely as a stable set of beliefs but increasingly as a dynamic process shaped within concrete life experience. Understanding one's faith and religious identity often emerges in situations of tension between tradition and personal experience, as individuals interpret their life narratives in light of their faith.[7] Faith thus appears less as a definitive answer to existential questions and more as an ongoing process of meaning-making amid uncertainty. Experiences of disruption, conflict, or doubt become moments in which both the image of God and personal religious self-understanding are reinterpreted. From this perspective, Paul Tillich's classical theological insight[8] may be reread in a contemporary key: faith does not exist without the risk of uncertainty, and doubt is not its opposite but an expression of human finitude before God. Contemporary interdisciplinary studies of spirituality indirectly confirm this view by demonstrating that religious belief functions as a dynamic process of meaning construction developing through an ongoing dialogue between experience and tradition.[9] Religious doubt within the context of contemporary European religiosity can therefore be understood less as a threat to faith than as a process through which faith becomes personally appropriated and reflectively grounded. Theology seeking to understand the religious experience of young people cannot regard doubt merely as something to be overcome, but rather as an experience through which faith often becomes, for the first time, consciously reflected and existentially one's own.

Religious Doubt as an Anthropological-Theological Phenomenon

In academic literature, religious doubt is often interpreted as a phenomenon typical of adolescence, a transitional phase accompanying identity formation. Developmental psychology has long demonstrated that adolescence represents a period of heightened reflexivity, during which inherited moral and religious convictions are re-evaluated.[10] Empirical studies of adolescent religiosity further confirm that questions and doubts tend to emerge precisely when young people

Abu-Raiya and Kenneth I. Pargament, "Religious Coping and Well-Being," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 7, no. 3 (2015): 1–12.

[7] R. Ruard Ganzevoort and Johan Roeland, "Lived Religion: The Praxis of Practical Theology," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 18, no. 1 (2014): 91–101, https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2014-0007; Joyce Ann Mercer, *Religion and Child Development* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020); Antti Laiho, "Faith, Identity and Narrative Meaning-Making," *Journal of Youth and Theology* 22, no. 2 (2023): 145–63.

[8] Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

[9] Kenneth I. Pargament, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy* (New York: Guilford Press, 2011); Crystal L. Park, "Religion and Meaning," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 5, no. 1 (2013): 1–12; Hardy et al., "Adolescent Religiousness."

[10] Erikson, *Identity*; Marcia, "Development and Validation of Ego-Identity Status"; King and Roeser, "Religion and Spirituality in Adolescent Development."

begin to relate inherited religious meanings to their own lived experience and to take personal responsibility for life decisions.[11] Doubt thus does not arise outside the process of faith, but rather at the moment of its gradual internalisation.

A particularly illuminating framework in this regard is Marcia's model of identity formation,[12] which understands identity as the outcome of tension between exploration and commitment. The state of identity moratorium—characterised by uncertainty, searching, and questioning—does not represent a deficit of identity but its active formation. A similar dynamic operates in the realm of faith: individuals who pass through periods of religious doubt tend to exhibit greater identity exploration and, subsequently, a more stable internalisation of religious conviction than those whose faith remains largely inherited.[13] The absence of doubt may correspond to what is termed foreclosure identity, a situation in which faith is accepted without personal reflection and remains strongly dependent on external authority.

These findings extend Fowler's theory of faith development, which interprets religious development as a gradual transition from socially shared faith to individually reflected faith.[14] According to Fowler, the move toward individuative-reflective faith is often initiated by experiences of tension or doubt that disrupt the earlier synthesis between personal experience and the inherited religious worldview. More recent studies, however, emphasise that this process is neither linear nor singular. Faith is repeatedly reconfigured throughout life in response to new experiences and life transitions, and the capacity to engage with uncertainty and ambivalence increasingly appears as a marker of religious and existential maturity.[15] From this perspective, doubt may be understood not merely as a developmental mechanism of adolescence, but as a broader anthropological phenomenon linked to the human search for meaning. Psychological studies of religious seeking show that faith functions as a process of meaning-making in which individuals continuously reinterpret their experience of the world in relation to the transcendent.[16] Moments of doubt arise when previously adequate interpretative frameworks no longer suffice to account for lived reality—for example, in

[11] Hunsberger, Pratt, and Pancer, "Religious Doubt"; Hardy et al., "Adolescent Religiousness."

[12] James E. Marcia, "Development and Validation of Ego-Identity Status," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 3, no. 5 (1966): 551–58, https://doi.org/10.1037/h0023281.

[13] Puffer et al., "Religious Doubt and Identity Formation"; Kézdy and Boland, "Religious Doubt and Identity Formation."

[14] James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

[15] Heinz Streib and Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Semantics and Psychology of Spiritual Transformation* (Cham: Springer, 2016); Heinz Streib and Barbara Keller, "Religious Styles Revisited," *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 40, no. 1 (2018): 1–22.

[16] Park, "Religion and Meaning"; Pargament, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy*.

encounters with suffering, moral conflict, or existential uncertainty.[17] This collision between experience and belief, already described by Allport as a clash of convictions, proves to be a crucial impulse for religious reflection.[18]

Theological anthropology may interpret this process as a consequence of human finitude and the limits of knowledge. Faith does not appear here as a state of definitive comprehension, but as an orientation of trust amid incomplete understanding—a perspective present both in the theological tradition since Augustine, and in contemporary emphasis on the biographical character of faith.[19] Experiences of doubt or uncertainty do not, within this framework, signify the failure of faith, but rather a moment in which the relationship between the human person, the world, and God is reinterpreted. Such a moment may represent a process of differentiation, through which religious conviction becomes personally appropriated rather than merely inherited. Religious doubt, therefore, need not be understood solely as a crisis of faith or a temporary developmental stage; it may instead correspond to the very structure of the human relationship to the transcendent, into which one always enters from a position of limited understanding and interpretation.

Emotions Toward God as a Theologically Relevant Experience

Religious doubt in lived experience rarely remains confined to the purely cognitive level. Research in spirituality and the psychology of religion consistently demonstrates that questioning faith is closely intertwined with the emotional experience of one's relationship with God, which may assume ambivalent or conflictual forms.[20] Particularly during adolescence—when religious identity is closely connected to the development of self-concept and relational security—questions of faith often emerge not primarily as intellectual problems, but as experiences of disappointment, anger, abandonment, or guilt in relation to God.[21] Negative emotions toward God are not limited to adolescence; they appear across age groups as part of religious life,[22] often arising when personal experiences of suffering or injustice disrupt an established image of God as protective and just.[23] The tension between theologically learned representations of God and existential

[17] Exline et al., "Religious and Spiritual Struggles."

[18] Gordon W. Allport, *The Individual and His Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1950).

[19] Ganzevoort and Roeland, "Lived Religion"; Mercer, *Religion and Child Development*; Laiho, "Faith, Identity and Narrative Meaning-Making."

[20] Exline and Rose, "Religious and Spiritual Struggles"; Abu-Raiya and Pargament, "Religious Coping and Well-Being."

[21] Pamela Ebstyne King and Chris J. Boyatzis, "Religious and Spiritual Development," in *Handbook of Child Psychology and Developmental Science*, ed. Richard M. Lerner (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2015); Hardy et al., "Adolescent Religiousness."

[22] Exline et al., "Religious and Spiritual Struggles."

[23] Neal Krause, "Religious Doubt and Psychological Well-Being," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45, no. 3 (2006): 1–15.

reality may evoke intense emotional reactions, including anger toward God or a sense of divine absence.[24] Such experiences may be understood as forms of relational tension. Attachment theory applied to the relationship with God suggests that the divine–human relationship functions analogously to significant interpersonal bonds and therefore includes experiences of trust, protest, and ambivalence.[25] From this perspective, negative emotions toward God do not necessarily signal weakened religiosity; instead, they may indicate the existential significance of the relationship itself. As Exline observes, people rarely feel anger toward a God who is irrelevant to them; conflict thus paradoxically confirms relational engagement in faith.[26]

Similarly, the biblical tradition presents faith not as the absence of conflict, but as a relationship capable of bearing protest and incomprehension. The laments of the Psalms, Job's dispute with God, and Christ's cry of abandonment on the cross illustrate that emotional tension toward God is woven into the very fabric of biblical faith. Protest here does not constitute a rejection of the relationship, but its radicalisation; faith persists precisely by turning toward God even in moments of dissonance between expectation and experience. This perspective is further developed in reflections on so-called vulnerable faith, which emphasise that authentic religious experience includes the possibility of uncertainty, emotional ambivalence, and the reinterpretation of one's image of God throughout life.[27] Faith, in this view, is not merely a stable emotional certainty but a relational process in which the image of God evolves alongside the believer's life experience.

The consequences of such emotions depend significantly on how they are interpreted within social and religious contexts. When negative emotions toward God are regarded as morally unacceptable or as signs of weak faith, they tend to be associated with shame, spiritual isolation, and decreased well-being.[28] Conversely, environments that allow open reflection on doubt and emotional ambivalence foster the integration of religious identity and the long-term stability of

[24] Joshua T. Wilt, Joshua B. Grubbs, and Julie J. Exline, "Religious and Spiritual Struggles and Well-Being," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 8, no. 3 (2016): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000054; David F. Bradley et al., "Anger toward God and Psychological Adjustment," *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 43, no. 2 (2021): 1–18.

[25] Pehr Granqvist and Lee A. Kirkpatrick, "Attachment and Religious Representations," in *Handbook of Attachment*, ed. Jude Cassidy and Phillip R. Shaver (New York: Guilford Press, 2016).

[26] Julie J. Exline, *Religious and Spiritual Struggles: Theory and Research* (New York: Guilford Press, 2021).

[27] R. Ruard Ganzevoort, "Forks in the Road When Tracing the Sacred: Practical Theology as Hermeneutics of Lived Religion," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 13, no. 1 (2009): 1–18; Mercer, *Religion and Child Development*.

[28] Abu-Raiya and Pargament, "Religious Coping and Well-Being"; Laura Stauner et al., "Religious and Spiritual Struggles and Well-Being," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 8, no. 4 (2016): 1–10.

faith.[29] Emotions toward God thus become a site where human experience encounters the transcendent and where God is perceived as a relational reality entering concrete life situations. From this perspective, the relationship between doubt and faith may be reconsidered: doubt accompanied by emotional struggle need not signify the loss of faith, but rather its transformation.

Empirical Insight: Religious Doubt and Emotions Toward God in the Experience of Czech Adolescents

Theoretical reflections on doubt and the emotional ambivalence of faith gain more concrete contours when viewed through the empirical experience of contemporary adolescents growing up in a secularised European context. A study conducted among Czech secondary school students (n = 984) examined the relationships between religious doubt, emotions toward God, and selected indicators of personal well-being, particularly meaning in life and self-concept.[30] In this respect, the Czech context represents a specific environment characterised by a high level of secularisation and a limited institutional presence of religion in the everyday lives of young people.[31] Religious experience among adolescents, therefore, often does not emerge from cultural self-evidence but develops within pluralistic or religiously indifferent social settings. Faith thus rarely functions as a stable starting point of identity formation; instead, it becomes one possible interpretative framework that must be personally justified and integrated.

As reported in our empirical study, religious doubt is not an exceptional phenomenon among adolescents but instead occurs across different levels of religiosity.[32] Its significance, however, varies substantially depending on the emotional quality of one's relationship with God. While the mere presence of doubt was not consistently associated with negative indicators of well-being, the combination of doubt with negative emotions toward God—particularly feelings of abandonment, anger, or disappointment—was related to a lower sense of meaning in life and reduced self-concept. This result corresponds with broader findings within research on religious struggle, which demonstrate that the relational dimension of faith significantly moderates the psychological impact of doubt.[33]

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[29] Pargament, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy*; Davis et al., "Religious Struggles and Psychological Health," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 11, no. 3 (2019): 1–12.

[30] Alice Kosarkova, "Religious Doubts and Emotions toward God in Adolescents," *Religions* 15, no. 11 (2024): Article 1390.

[31] Dana Hamplova and Blanka Rehakova, "Czech Religious Situation after the Collapse of State Socialism," *Sociologický časopis / Czech Sociological Review* 45, no. 3 (2009): 581–602.

[32] Kosarkova, "Religious Doubts and Emotions toward God in Adolescents."

[33] Exline et al., "Religious and Spiritual Struggles"; Abu-Raiya and Pargament, "Religious Coping and Well-Being."

The context in which adolescents experience their faith proved to be particularly significant. Respondents who described supportive religious environments—whether within family life, peer relationships, or religious education—reported lower levels of negative emotions toward God and a higher likelihood of integrating doubt into positively experienced religiosity. This finding resonates with studies on religious socialisation, which show that environments that allow questioning and interpretation foster more stable religious identities than those that emphasise normative certainty.[34] Thus, the data suggest an essential distinction between doubt as a cognitive process and as an existential crisis. Questioning itself does not necessarily threaten faith or personal development; difficulties arise primarily when doubt is accompanied by a disrupted relationship with God or by the perception that such experiences lack legitimacy. This corresponds with findings in the psychology of religion, indicating that the negative impact of doubt depends less on its intensity than on its interpretation and social framing.[35]

The findings from the study among Czech adolescents thus suggest that the decisive factor is not the presence of doubt itself but the quality of the relational context in which doubt is experienced. Adolescent faith appears less as a stable system of beliefs protected from questioning and more as a relational process whose continuity depends on the possibility of integrating uncertainty into a meaningful relationship with God. In line with the theoretical considerations outlined above, doubt becomes destructive primarily when it loses its relational and interpretative framework. This insight consequently raises the question of how theological and pastoral practices may create spaces in which doubt does not lead to the disintegration of faith but becomes part of its maturation.

Accompanying Adolescents and Faith Formed Amid Doubt

Religious doubt cannot be understood merely as a developmental phase or as an individual psychological problem. Instead, it emerges as an experience situated at the threshold of transformation—a liminal space in which previous religious understandings become insufficient without being entirely abandoned. From an anthropological perspective, this situation may be described as a state between inherited and personally appropriated faith, where established interpretative frameworks lose their self-evidence while new ones have not yet fully stabilised. It is precisely this phase of uncertainty that becomes a decisive moment in iden-

[34] Pamela Ebstyne King and James L. Furrow, "Religion as a Resource for Positive Youth Development: Religion, Social Capital, and Moral Outcomes," *Developmental Psychology* 40, no. 5 (2004): 703–13, https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.40.5.703; Anat Cohen-Malayev, Ofra Schachter, and Ariel Rich, "Religious Socialization and Identity Formation among Adolescents," *Journal of Adolescence* 37, no. 6 (2014): 1–11.

[35] Krause and Wulff, "Religious Doubt and Health"; Wilt, Grubbs, and Exline, "Religious and Spiritual Struggles and Well-Being."

tity formation. Doubt here does not signify the absence of faith, but its differentiation from social conformity and the gradual assumption of personal responsibility for one's religious orientation.[36] Studies further suggest that adolescents often do not leave faith because they ask questions, but because their questions fail to find an interpretable space within the religious environment to which they belong.[37] The liminality of doubt may thus become either a space of maturation or a breaking point—depending on how it is interpreted and accompanied.

In this context, it is necessary to acknowledge a significant theological and pastoral risk: the pathologisation of doubt. When doubt is implicitly framed as a failure of faith, a moral deficiency, or a lack of loyalty to the ecclesial community, tension arises between the seeker's authentic experience and the normative image of "proper" belief. Such stress may weaken rather than deepen faith. Research on religious struggle indicates that doubt, when interpreted as a spiritual deficit, is associated with shame, isolation, and gradual alienation from the religious community.[38] Faith is then not abandoned because of the questions themselves, but because those questions are perceived as illegitimate within the ecclesial space. A paradox of pastoral practice becomes visible here. A tradition of faith historically shaped in dialogue with existential uncertainty and the search for meaning may be reduced to a demand for certainty and unequivocal answers. Where faith is presented as a closed system of definitive solutions, the liminal experience of doubt ceases to function as a place of growth and instead becomes a moment of separation. The challenge, therefore, is not to eliminate doubt but to recognise and carry it as part of the journey of faith.

If doubt is interpreted as a liminal experience within relational faith, the nature of the response changes accordingly. The question is not primarily how to remove uncertainty, but how to accompany it. Research on adolescent religiosity repeatedly shows that the stability of faith is less related to cognitive certainty than to the quality of the relational and interpretative environment in which questions may be shared.[39] Contexts that foster open reflection facilitate the integration of doubt into religious identity, whereas environments oriented toward normative control tend to hinder it. Several implications follow for pastoral practice and religious education. First, doubt must be legitimised as part of faith rather than construed as its opposite. Adolescence is a period in which faith inevitably enters into dialogue with autonomy and personal experience; the absence of questioning may indicate unexamined religiosity rather than maturity.[40] Accompaniment, therefore, does not consist primarily in controlling belief but in walking alongside

[36] Puffer et al., "Religious Doubt and Identity Formation"; Streib and Hood, *Semantics and Psychology of Spiritual Transformation*.

[37] Hunsberger, Pratt, and Pancer, "Religious Doubt"; Hardy et al., "Adolescent Religiousness."

[38] Exline et al., "Religious and Spiritual Struggles"; Abu-Raiya and Pargament, "Religious Coping and Well-Being."

[39] King and Furrow, "Religion as a Resource for Positive Youth Development"; Cohen-Malayev et al., "Religious Socialization and Identity Formation."

[40] Puffer et al., "Religious Doubt and Identity Formation."

young people as they engage in meaning-making and appropriation of faith. Second, the way religious authorities respond to emotional ambivalence proves decisive. The opportunity to express uncertainty or negative emotions toward God without fear of rejection supports the continuity of religious identity.[41] Pastoral responsibility thus shifts from providing immediate answers to creating a safe interpretative space. This includes the willingness of adults to model vulnerability in faith—to share belief not as a finished certainty but as a living process that provides for tension, questioning, and trust. Such authenticity is often more compelling to adolescents than displays of unshakable certainty.

Equally important is integrating faith with young people's concrete life experiences. Religious education and pastoral practice foster healthy development when they enable dialogical engagement with tradition and respect adolescents' spiritual agency. Research on religious socialisation demonstrates that experiences of autonomy and respect promote deeper identification with faith more effectively than pressures toward conformity.[42] Faith thus becomes not merely the transmission of content, but a space for interpreting life decisions and existential questions. What truly supports the maturation of faith, therefore, is not the removal of liminality but the capacity to remain within it. Adolescent faith is often formed precisely through experiences of uncertainty. Doubt does not mark the boundary of faith, but a space in which inherited belief may be transformed into personally appropriated trust.

This perspective also carries implications for contemporary European theology. Reflection on religious doubt and emotions toward God in adolescent experience suggests that the primary issue is not the decline of faith, but the transformation of the conditions under which faith emerges and matures. Young people's faith no longer develops within a framework of cultural self-evidence, but within contexts of plurality, reflexivity, and existential uncertainty. Doubt, therefore, appears not as an exceptional crisis, but as an ordinary space of formation. On this site, faith is shaped through dialogue between lived experience, relationship, and the search for meaning. Two challenges follow. First, theology is called to deeper engagement with the empirical experience of believers, especially the younger generation, whose religious lives often unfold beyond stable institutional frameworks. Second, theology must cultivate a language of faith capable of bearing uncertainty and questioning without reducing them to spiritual deficiency. In this sense, one may recall the appeal of Pope Leo XIV, who emphasised in his address

[41] Davis et al., "Religious Struggles and Psychological Health"; Wilt, Grubbs, and Exline, "Religious and Spiritual Struggles and Well-Being."

[42] Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 68–78, https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68; Guy Assor, Hanoch Kanat-Maymon, and Avi Kaplan, "Autonomy Support and Religious Internalization," *Journal of Personality* 73, no. 2 (2005): 1–28.

to digital creators that the language of our time should not merely generate content but also create genuine encounters of hearts and give voice to love.[43] This insight concerns not only communication or technology, but also the way the Church accompanies young people in their faith. The task of theology, therefore, is not to defend faith against doubt, but to recognise doubt as one of the places where faith is newly born in the contemporary world. *Theologiam promovendam* today may mean cultivating the Church as a space of encounter—of listening, accompaniment, and shared hope—where young people may question and doubt while remaining on the journey. Faith thus appears not as a static possession of certainty, but as a living relationship and shared pilgrimage sustained by trust even when understanding remains incomplete.

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[43] Leo XIV, *Address to Digital Content Creators*, July 2025, *Vatican News*, July 29, 2025, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2025-07/pope-at-mass-creators-should-promote-encounters-between-hearts.html.

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CONTINUITY IN DISCONTINUITY:

JESUIT PASTORAL STRATEGIES IN RESPONSE TO SECULARISATION IN THE NETHERLANDS

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Abstract

This chapter examines the pastoral strategies of the Jesuits in Amsterdam as a response to the highly secularised environment in the Netherlands. Through a qualitative content analysis of the magazine *Jezuïeten* (2014–24), this study explores the pastoral strategies of the Amsterdam Jesuits, revealing how they utilise the unique characteristics of Ignatian spirituality to address the challenges of secularisation and the decline of Catholicism. The findings demonstrate that rather than adopting pluralistic spiritualities, the Jesuits reinforce their distinct charism by employing non-religious, implicit language and digital platforms to reach a broader audience in the spiritual market. Furthermore, the research suggests that the unique nature of Ignatian spirituality—specifically its focus on "finding God in all things" and the "discernment of spirits"—offers greater flexibility than other traditional Catholic spiritualities in adapting to a secular context. By presenting traditional faith in the form of a "new spirituality," the Jesuits undertake a "new evangelisation" that manifests a state of "continuity in discontinuity." While rooted in the specific flexibility of the Ignatian charism, the experience of inculturation in Jesuit Amsterdam provides a framework for how the Church and other traditional religious orders can creatively engage with the post-secular West without compromising their core identity.

Keywords: Secularisation; Jesuits; Ignatian spirituality; pastoral strategies; new spirituality; inculturation.

Introduction

Secularisation is a defining issue across European countries, denoting the decline in the social and individual significance of religion.[1] The Netherlands is frequently cited as one of the most secularised countries in Europe.[2] Empirical data indicate that 56% of the population reported no religious affiliation in 2024,[3] and only around 14% of the Dutch population attends church services occasionally or regularly.[4] Many Dutch people are even afraid and ashamed to disclose their Christian faith in public.[5] In reference to Karel Dobbelaere's three levels of secularisation—individual, organisational, and societal—this phenomenon does not only appear on the societal and individual levels, where religion has become a functional subsystem of society and the transformation or *bricolage* of personal beliefs occurs outside church authorities, but also within church institutions, possibly changing practices and accepting secular values.[6] In the Netherlands, many Christian spiritual centres have been more open to all spiritualities in order to welcome a broader audience that is seeking spiritual but not necessarily religious services in the market.[7] While a "more open" spirituality seems to be a new pattern, the Jesuits in Amsterdam adopted a contrasting "confessional scenario," shutting down their ecumenical spiritual centre and instead highlighting their Catholic and congregational profile in 2014.[8] What developments have followed

[1] Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society: Fifty Years On*, ed. Steve Bruce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6; Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1, http://site.ebrary.com/id/10590420; Inger Furseth and Pål Repstad, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2023), 3, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003173380.

[2] Claude Dargent, "Religious Change, Public Space and Beliefs in Europe," in *European Values: Trends and Divides Over Thirty Years*, ed. Pierre Bréchon and Frédéric Gonthier, European Values Studies 17 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2017), 106, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004341067_008.

[3] "Religieuze Betrokkenheid; Persoonskenmerken," CBS Statline, accessed April 18, 2025, https://opendata.cbs.nl/#/CBS/nl/dataset/82904NED/table.

[4] Joris Kregting, Fred van Lieburg, and Paul Vermeer, *God in Nederland: 1966–2024* (Amsterdam: HDC Centre for Religious History, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2025), 62.

[5] Stephan Sanders, *Godschaamte: Een eigentijdse expeditie op zoek naar God* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Van Oorschot, 2021).

[6] Karel Dobbelaere, *Secularization: An Analysis at Three Levels* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2002), 17–24, 173, https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-0352-6146-2.

[7] Kees de Groot, *The Liquidation of the Church*, Routledge New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 95–113.

[8] De Groot, *The Liquidation of the Church*, 110.

this symbolic change over the subsequent decade? How have their pastoral strategies responded to the secularised context of the Netherlands? These questions form the scope of this research.

By focussing on the seasonal magazine *Jezuïeten*, published by the Jesuits of the Low Countries, this study explores the question of how the Jesuit community in Amsterdam has responded to the challenges of secularisation over the past decade (2014–24). This study conducts a qualitative content analysis of 41 issues from 2014 to 2024. Content related to the Amsterdam community are extracted for thematic analysis.

This research reveals that the Jesuits in Amsterdam have adopted a secular, implicit language in their publications and have used new media to broaden their reach. While this approach aligns with the patterns of "new spirituality" and echoes the model of religion in liquid modernity, in which individuals seek to fulfil spiritual needs without necessarily attaching themselves to a formal religious institution,[9] the Jesuits do not compromise their traditional Catholic identity. The findings suggest that, unlike other spiritual centres in the Netherlands that have opened themselves to pluralistic spiritualities, the Jesuits are instead able to focus on strengthening their own charism and congregational identity under organisational secularisation.[10] Through a descriptive practical theology approach, this chapter highlights how their work manifests a state of "continuity in discontinuity" by continuing the traditional Catholic faith through discontinuous, extraordinary methods, offering valuable perspectives for addressing secularisation across the Netherlands and Europe.

This chapter proceeds by presenting three thematic strategies: (1) implicit and secular language, (2) digital inculturation, and (3) collaborative evangelisation, followed by an interpretation of findings.

Implicit and Secular Language

One of the most significant findings is the Jesuits' strategic use of implicit, non-religious language. In a culture where institutional religion has lost its social significance but spiritual demand remains, the Jesuits have effectively "hidden" traditional religious jargon to reach "unbound spiritual seekers" and have highlighted spirituality over religion.[11] For instance, Nikolaas Sintobin SJ has published a few spiritual readings that do not explicitly mention God or religion but

[9] De Groot, *The Liquidation of the Church*, 98–100; Anke Bisschops, "The New Spirituality and Religious Transformation in the Netherlands," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 19, no. 1 (January 2015): 24–39, https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2014-0052.

[10] De Groot, *The Liquidation of the Church*, 95–110.

[11] Bisschops, "The New Spirituality and Religious Transformation," 24–39.

emphasise *wijsheid* (wisdom), *gevoel* (feelings), and *keuzes leren maken* (learning to make choices).[12] The content focusses on the application of discernment in Ignatian spirituality. However, unlike the *Spiritual Exercises* or ordinary spiritual books, Sintobin does not use religious jargon such as spiritual consolation/desolation, and the discernments are not focused on (religious) vocation or finding God's will, but on how to make decisions in daily life. The tone appears to have been intentionally stripped of religious elements and sounds more secular for (non-Christian) laymen. In one of his books, *Levenslessen* (Life Lessons), it is especially highlighted that "the book is written in 'a language that our secularised culture can understand' and addresses the importance of taking seriously the inner movements you experience while engaged in activities."[13]

This tailor-made "secular translation" of Ignatian spirituality appears to be highly successful in the secularised Low Countries, for which Sintobin received the *Publieksprijs voor het Spirituele en Christelijke boek* (Public Award for the Spiritual and Christian Book) in 2021 and 2023, respectively, and *Levenslessen* was also shortlisted in the Netherlands for Best Theological Book and in Flanders for Best Spiritual Book in 2023.[14] The success in book sales shows that these strategies of book publishing and writing, including the language, presentation, and the topics, match the (spiritual) demand and appetite of the secular public in the Low Countries, which is less religious, while remaining spiritually needy.[15] Sintobin also writes spiritual articles in a women's glossy magazine, *Liefke*,[16] further broadening the frontier of evangelisation. This represents a strategic dialogue with the Dutch secularised society and culture, effectively translating the Church's universal call for new evangelisation into a local, accessible practice.[17]

[12] Nikolaas Sintobin, *Levenslessen: Hoe oude wijsheid jouw leven in bloei zet* (Utrecht, Tielt: KokBoekencentrum Uitgevers; Lannoo, 2023), 7; Nikolaas Sintobin, *Vertrouw op je gevoel: Keuzes leren maken met Ignatius van Loyola* (Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum Uitgevers, 2021).

[13] "*Het boek is geschreven in 'een taal die onze geseculariseerde cultuur kan verstaan.' Het gaat over het ernstig nemen van de innerlijke bewegingen die je ervaart bij wat je aan het doen bent.*" Translation is mine. "Korte berichten," *Jezuïeten*, no. 76 (Voorjaar 2024): 10.

[14] "Korte berichten," *Jezuïeten*, no. 69 (Lente 2022): 12; "Korte berichten," *Jezuïeten*, no. 76 (Voorjaar 2024): 10; "Korte berichten," *Jezuïeten*, no. 78 (Najaar 2024): 14.

[15] Kees de Groot, "Spiritualiteit en Christelijke Godsdienst: Op zoek naar een verhouding," in *Zelf Zorgen Voor Je Ziel: De Actualiteit van Christelijke Spirituele Centra*, ed. Kees de Groot, Jos Pieper, and Willem Putman (Almere: Parthenon, 2013), 15–30.

[16] "Korte berichten," *Jezuïeten*, no. 56 (Winter 2018): 12.

[17] Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), no. 238, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

Digital Inculturation

Another significant strategy demonstrated is the digital pastoral ministry. The new *Platform voor Ignatiaanse Spiritualiteit* (Platform for Ignatian spirituality, hereafter "the Platform"), located in Amsterdam, was launched on October 1, 2014, replacing the old ecumenical spiritual centre that provided formation across various church traditions.[18] Digital ministry is one of the foci of the Platform, which involves producing material for *Bidden Onderweg* (Pray as You Go, hereafter "BO"), a daily prayer podcast, and digital retreats, as well as managing various websites.[19]

BO is a daily prayer podcast application that features verses from the daily Scripture readings and provides reflection questions for prayer in everyday life. BO also offers special podcasts, such as "Jesuits and Resistance: 80 Years of Liberation," and audiobooks like "The Life of Ignatius." BO aims to help people become aware of the existence of God in one's life, listening to and reflecting on God's word, growing in one's relationship with God, and supporting the development of a regular prayer life.[20] The members of the production team are motivated to reach the younger generation, and they have successfully reached audiences starting at about age 25.[21] The content was first translated into English and then into other languages.[22] In 2015, the daily reflection podcast of BO had about 5,000 visitors per day.[23]

A digital retreat is another important form of online ministry, usually offered during Advent and Lent, via the website www.ignatiaansbidden.org. Participants can sign up and receive a daily email containing a Scripture passage, suggestions for prayer, faith reflections, quotes from the Church Fathers and the Ignatian tradition, and tips on how to pray. There is no commitment, and it is free of charge. People can do it whenever and wherever they are available. The influence of the digital retreat was remarkable. In 2015, 11,000 people in the Low Countries participated, with 96 expats from other countries.[24] The director of the Platform in

[18] Dorine Baas, Simon Rienks, and Gery van der Vlies, "Ignatiaanse meditatiegroepen in Delft en Amsterdam: een uitwisseling," *Jezuïeten*, no. 58 (Zomer 2019): 8–9; De Groot, *The Liquidation of the Church*, 110.

[19] Websites on Ignatian spirituality managed by the Platform include www.biddenonderweg.org, www.ignatiaansbidden.org, www.verderkijken.org, www.inalledingen.org, and www.igniswebmagazine.nl.

[20] "Over ons," Bidden Onderweg, accessed May 30, 2025, https://biddenonderweg.org/over-ons.

[21] Karin Benoist, "Ignatius was ook een podcast begonnen," *Jezuïeten*, no. 64 (Winter 2020): 5–7.

[22] Benoist, "Ignatius was ook een podcast begonnen," 6.

[23] "Korte berichten," *Jezuïeten*, no. 44 (Winter 2015): 11.

[24] "Digitale Adventsretraite 2015: 'Naar U Gaat Mijn Verlangen,'" *Jezuïeten*, no. 44 (Winter 2015): 27.

2016 recalled that the digital retreat programme is a response to the provincial superior's request to reach a broader audience.[25]

Through the inculturation of digital ministry, the Amsterdam Jesuits can tackle the problem that people no longer want to go to church due to busy secular lives. Also, it relieves the physical limitations of space and manpower. Logistically, if they were to organise onsite retreats, they would not be able to reach thousands of people during Advent or Lent, and that could not be done daily and continuously. With a handy podcast that people can listen to on their way to work, spirituality is returned to the centre of people's lives. It not only fulfils the liquidity of the church model,[26] but also enables the Ignatian "contemplative in action" to be integrated into the daily lives of secularised laypeople.

Collaborative Evangelisation

Due to societal and individual secularisation, the number of Jesuits in the Low Countries has been drastically and constantly diminished. Collaborative evangelisation between religious members and laity has become necessary. In 2014, at the beginning of the period covered by this research, there were two residential houses of the Amsterdam Jesuits and a community in Delft. The Netherlands was also an independent province. However, due to the deaths of older Jesuits and the lack of new vocations, the Provinces of North Belgium (BSE), i.e. Flanders, and the Provinces of the Netherlands (NER) merged into the European Low Countries Region (ELC) in 2018.[27] Meanwhile, the Delft community was suspended in 2017, and all the Amsterdam Jesuits moved to *De Krijtberg* (the popular name of the Jesuits' church of St. Francis Xavier in Amsterdam) in 2022.[28] Given this background, we can see that the Amsterdam Jesuits have been undertaking more ministry in the Netherlands, while relying heavily on the laity. For instance, the director of the Platform was formerly a Jesuit but is now a layperson, along with a few lay co-workers.[29]

Challenged by the decline in vocations, the Amsterdam Jesuits have extended their evangelisation ministry not only by employing lay workers but also by working with Protestants and using mass media. For instance, in 2014, the Dutch Evangelical Broadcaster, the Evangelische Omroep (hereafter "EO") invited two Jesuits from Amsterdam, along with a Protestant sister, to lead a special retreat inspired by the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius for five well-known Dutch public

[25] Ward Biemans, "Boeiend om in deze tijd jezuïet te zijn," *Jezuïeten*, no. 46 (Zomer 2016): 8–10.

[26] De Groot, *The Liquidation of the Church*.

[27] Societatis Iesu, *Catalogus Provinciarum: Britanniae & Hiberniae et Europae Finium Inferirum 2018* (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2018), 154.

[28] Dries van den Akker and Bert ten Berge, "Het Stanislascollege in Delft," *Jezuïeten*, no. 50 (Zomer 2017): 3–5; "Korte berichten," *Jezuïeten*, no. 70 (Zomer 2022): 10.

[29] Karin Benoist, "Platform voor Ignatiaanse Spiritualiteit: Glenn ter Veer—'De Heer schrijft recht op kromme lijnen,'" *Jezuïeten*, no. 74 (Najaar 2023): 4–7.

figures, who generally had little knowledge of the Christian faith, at a monastery in southern France. It was filmed and adapted into a six-episode, 30-minute reality TV series *Op zoek naar God* (In Search of God), which was broadcast in prime time. More than 300,000 people watched this series, with a significant portion of the audience having a lower educational level.[30] The entire concept was designed to give people who normally never attend church and often know nothing at all about the Christian faith a taste of the adventure of silence, spiritual guidance, and listening to the Word of God. The Jesuits concluded this to be a form of popular apostolate. This apostolate utilises contemporary media and visual storytelling, broadcasting via the EO, which was able to make this form of evangelisation accessible to as broad an audience as possible. Given the EO's Protestant background, it was also an ecumenical initiative that promoted Ignatian spirituality in the Protestant section of the Dutch population.[31]

In the meantime, the Jesuits in Amsterdam not only evangelise directly to the public themselves, but also indirectly through providing support and formation to laypeople and youth. In other words, they fish and, at the same time, nurture (lay) fishers. For instance, eight young people from the international youth community Living Stones (hereafter "LS") live on their property, *Spuizicht*, next door to *De Krijtberg*, and offer free guided tours to visitors and tourists, including Muslims, Jews, and other non-Christians, in this famous tourist city. While a Jesuit serves as a chaplain to LS, providing spiritual direction, formation, and retreats to LS members, LS members also organise weekly formation and prayer meetings for other international youth in the city.[32] Moreover, the Platform trains lay Catholic and even Protestant ministers to serve as guides for the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises.[33]

I argue that the collaborative evangelisation strategy is not only an expedient measure in the face of the Order's shortage of manpower, but also offers workable solutions to the inculturation of secularisation. At the same time, the Amsterdam Jesuits are implementing the Church's policies of new evangelisation by cooperating with the laity,[34] encouraging the people of God not only to passively receive God's message but also to encounter God through the service of evangelisation and to find God in all things. We can also see that this is not clericalizing the laity, but inviting laypeople to undertake a suitable responsibility for a new evangelisation, which may be more effective in view of the secularised character of

[30] Nikolaas Sintobin, "Op zoek naar God: Een nieuwe vorm van volksapostolaat," *Jezuïeten*, no. 39 (Herfst 2014): 3–5.

[31] Sintobin, "Op zoek naar God," 3–5.

[32] Ben Frie, "Nieuwe start voor Living Stones," *Jezuïeten*, no. 74 (Najaar 2023): 10–11.

[33] "Korte berichten," *Jezuïeten*, no. 67 (Winter 2021): 13.

[34] John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*: Apostolic Letter at the Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2001), no. 40, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/apost_letters/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte.html.

the Netherlands. Young people from different countries in LS can be more capable of and friendly in welcoming the public to the Church than religious and clergy, as they are native inhabitants of the secular world. Non-Catholics, like the TV producers or editors of the EO programme, may also unintentionally evangelise and be evangelised while fulfilling their duties. Meanwhile, it has been demonstrated that promoting ecumenism does not necessarily entail abandoning the Order's identity or opening up to other spiritualities; it can be achieved through practical cooperation, such as the EO TV initiative, offering retreats together with Protestant sisters, and accepting Protestants as guides for the Spiritual Exercises.

Interpretation: Continuity in Discontinuity

The September 2024 meeting between Pope Francis and the Jesuits of the Low Countries serves as a critical validation of the Amsterdam community's methodology. The Pope's emphasis on "discernment" and "working on the frontiers" aligns with the community's ongoing efforts to redefine its presence in a secularised city centre.[35] For the Amsterdam Jesuits, discernment is not merely an internal spiritual exercise but a deliberate pastoral strategy used to navigate the "borderline" situations of the secular West. This allows them to explore forms of spiritual formation that extend to the boundaries and even beyond the boundaries of the Church.

This chapter suggests that through the strategies of the Jesuits in Amsterdam, there is a possibility of "continuity in discontinuity," or in other words, remaining close to Pope Benedict XVI's "hermeneutic of reform," in the Church's pastoral practices.[36] After Vatican II, some theologians argue, there is either a rupture with the past or an understanding of continuity with the Church's tradition.[37] I am not in favour of viewing the Second Vatican Council as characterised by either "continuity" or "discontinuity;" however, I am borrowing the concepts to discuss how the Amsterdam Jesuits have showcased that we can adopt "continuity in discontinuity" in pastoral perspectives. They employ new, practical methods and language (discontinuity), even without mentioning God, to convey the traditional Ignatian spirituality and the Catholic faith (continuity). In a secular era and in

[35] Antonio Spadaro, "'Do Not Be Afraid': Pope Francis Meets with Jesuits in Belgium," *Civilta Cattolica*, October 2024, https://doi.org/10.32009/22072446.1024.16.

[36] Benedict XVI, "Address to the Roman Curia Offering Them His Christmas Greetings" (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.html.

[37] Salvador Pié-Ninot, "The History of Conciliar Reception," in *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, ed. Catherine E. Clifford and Massimo Faggioli (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 347–57. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198813903.013.47.

societies such as the Netherlands, continuity and discontinuity in practical pastoral ministry are not mutually exclusive and can coexist with the discernment of the Holy Spirit.

Such "continuity in discontinuity" is embodied in various nuanced ways to tackle different levels of secularisation. First, at the organisational level, this chapter has demonstrated that the Amsterdam Jesuits have proven that "a third way" in the spiritual market in the Netherlands is possible. While other Christian spiritual centres seem to embrace discontinuity by opening up to new spirituality in order to carry on, the Jesuits have taken an alternative approach, strengthening their congregation and Catholic profile as a niche strategy and targeting devoted faithful who want to deepen their faith.[38] However, after nearly a decade, this research shows that the niche strategy of the Jesuits in Amsterdam is not an "either secular or confessional religious profile" approach, but provides spiritual care with a strong religious profile using non-religious language and targeting the public. However, I argue that this may be a unique phenomenon applicable only to the Jesuits. As the nature of Ignatian spirituality is fundamentally inclusive, active, and contemplative at the same time, and aims at "finding God in all things," the discernment of spirits can be readily applied to various situations, including everyday secular experiences. Other traditional spiritualities, which developed in cloisters and emphasise silence and solitude, may not easily replicate the Jesuits' experience.

Second, in response to individual secularisation, where people are less willing to attach themselves to a particular religious institution but tend to engage in the *bricolage* of personal beliefs,[39] the Amsterdam Jesuits have managed to present the "old/traditional spirituality," i.e. Ignatian spirituality, in a "new spirituality" format. "New spirituality" is often understood as encompassing diverse religions and worldviews and as being detached from the religious institutional framework.[40] The approaches that the Amsterdam Jesuits have adopted, such as publishing "non-religious" spiritual books and creating digital retreats and podcasts, provide an opportunity for people to approach the traditional Ignatian spirituality without attaching themselves to the Church or the Society of Jesus. Books and spiritual materials are available online and offline for personal consumption, allowing consumers to obtain them anywhere without notifying the producer (the Jesuits). On the other hand, rather than opening themselves up to other spiritualities, such as yoga or Buddhism, the Jesuits continue to uphold their own Ignatian spirituality and identity while remaining open to various receivers, platforms of

[38] De Groot, *The Liquidation of the Church*, 95–110.

[39] Dobbelaere, *Secularization*, 173.

[40] Bisschops, "The New Spirituality and Religious Transformation in the Netherlands," 30–32; Kees de Groot, Jos Pieper, and Willem Putman, "New Spirituality in Old Monasteries?" in *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion. Volume 5 (2014): Sociology and Monasticism. Between Innovation and Tradition*, ed. Isabelle Jonveaux, Stefania Palmisano, and Enzo Pace (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2014), 107–30, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004283503.

promotion, and different ways of practice. In other words, they do not insist on adopting Ignatian spirituality only for the faithful and religious in prayer life, but also welcome people from all backgrounds to learn and employ Ignatian spirituality, or more precisely Ignatian discernment, in their daily lives. This can be seen as utilising the "new spirituality" practical framework while maintaining the content and values faithful to traditional Ignatian spirituality. In a secularised context like the Netherlands, such an approach is more likely to be welcomed.

Conclusion

This study has examined the multifaceted pastoral strategies of the Jesuits in Amsterdam from 2014 to 2024, identifying a model of "continuity in discontinuity." The findings suggest that the Jesuit response to the decline of Catholicism in the Netherlands is not monolithic. Instead, it comprises a diverse range of strategies, from implicit language in traditional media to digital prayer platforms, targeting different segments of the secular and spiritual market. In fact, it aligns with the inherent Jesuit missionary nature of inculturation—their actions may be "too creative" and sometimes beyond the Church's boundaries, but their core values and identity remain loyal and faithful to the Church's teaching.[41] I argue that this inculturation is not only effective for different ethnic cultures, but is also applicable to the temporal, modern, secularised culture. Given the success of this experiment on the secularised frontier, namely the Netherlands, these strategies offer a valuable reference for other European countries facing the challenge of secularisation.

This research is limited to works mentioned in the seasonal magazine *Jezuïeten* from 2014 to 2024. Other Jesuit publications from the same period may offer a broader perspective and could be explored further.

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[41] Jeffrey Muller, "The Jesuit Strategy of Accommodation," in *Jesuit Image Theory*, ed. Walter S. Melion, Karl A. E. Enenkel, and Wietse de Boer (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 461–92, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004319127_016.

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PATTERNS OF SPIRITUAL ABUSE—THE GERMAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

This chapter examines the growing recognition of spiritual abuse within the German Catholic Church and theology. It argues that spiritual abuse constitutes a distinct form of abuse that violates spiritual self-determination and deeply affects victims' identity and faith. Drawing on recent theological research and survivor testimonies, the chapter outlines the current state of the debate in Germany and identifies recurring patterns of abuse. These include grooming, emotional dependency, pressure to perform spiritually, manipulation, isolation, and thought reform. A case study illustrates how these mechanisms lead to loss of self, alienation from God, and severe psychological consequences. The chapter concludes that greater awareness, professional standards in spiritual direction, and critical reflection on power and authority are essential for preventing spiritual abuse and fostering pastoral care that respects personal freedom and dignity.

Keywords: Spiritual abuse; spiritual self-determination; Catholic Church in Germany; pastoral care; spiritual direction; power and authority; grooming; thought reform.

Introduction

"Sexualised violence already takes everything. Spiritualised violence even takes what is left after the last shirt: a human being's innermost secret. People enter that inviolable space; by doing so they rob another human being of their dignity."[1] These words from a survivor mark the beginning of this chapter. They were written by Sr. Sophia Weixler. Sr. Sophia published a new interpretation of the

[1] Sophia Weixler, *Ich atme Hoffnung. Psalmen jenseits von Gewalt und Missbrauch* (Ostfildern: Patmos, 2023), 159–60. The translation of the original German text into English was done by the author of this chapter, as were all other quotations from original German sources.

Psalms in 2023. She is a survivor of sexual and spiritual abuse, abuse she experienced as a woman religious. Her words lead to the very heart, the core of what spiritual abuse is: it is an attack on one's innermost being. People who speak of spiritual abuse are not simply having a "bad experience." They are experiencing a grave violation of their innermost being and their faith. For some victims this can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder. Just like sexual abuse, spiritual abuse has devastating consequences for those affected, the victims. The French Prior General of the Carthusians, Dysmas de Lassus, quotes a victim of spiritual abuse who noted they were "raped in my innermost intimacy," speaking of "forced entry into the sanctuary of inner life."[2] The German theologian and philosopher Doris Reisinger describes it as "violent intrusion into a person's spiritual intimacy."[3] Spiritual abuse constitutes a serious violation of spiritual self-determination. Just as there is a violation of sexual self-determination, so too is there a violation of spiritual self-determination.[4]

This paper focuses on two questions: What is the current status of the issue of spiritual abuse, specifically in Germany? And, based on the reports of victims, how can the typical experiences and patterns of abuse be described?

The Issue of Spiritual Abuse in Theological Publications

The issue of spiritual abuse has only in recent years been more widely acknowledged in the Catholic Church. A discrepancy is striking here: the phenomenon has been discussed internationally, particularly in Protestant churches, for decades. As early as 1991, the Americans David Johnson and Jeffrey van Vonderen published a work entitled *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*.[5] Their observations relate to experiences within the evangelical sphere. Psychologists Lisa Oakley and Kathryn Kinmond, Manchester, set a milestone with their book published in 2013: *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse*.[6] Drawing on the experiences of victims, they describe and define spiritual abuse as:

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[2] Dysmas de Lassus, *Verheißung und Verrat. Geistlicher Missbrauch in Orden und Gemeinschaften der katholischen Kirche* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2022), 220.

[3] Doris Reisinger, "Missbrauch von Menschen oder Missbrauch von Macht? Zur fundamentalen Bedeutung eines personbezogenen Verständnisses von spirituellem Missbrauch," *Lebendige Seelsorge*, no. 3 (2023): 146–51, 149–50.

[4] For a detailed discussion of this definition: Ute Leimgruber and Barbara Haslbeck, "Angriff auf das Innerste. Hinführung zu den Berichten über spirituellen Missbrauch," in *Selbstverlust und Gottentfremdung. Spiritueller Missbrauch an Frauen in der katholischen Kirche,* ed. Barbara Haslbeck, Ute Leimgruber, Regina Nagel, and Philippa Rath (Ostfildern: Patmos, 2023), 17–56, esp. 23–27.

[5] David Johnson, and Jeffrey VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* (Bloomington: Bethany House Publishers, 1991). German translation: David Johnson, and Jeffrey VanVonderen, *Die zerstörende Kraft des geistlichen Missbrauchs* (Hünfeld: Christlicher Mediendienst, 2016).

[6] Lisa Oakley and Kathryn Kinmond, *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

> coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context. The victim experiences spiritual abuse as a deeply emotional personal attack. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, interference with decision-making, demands for secrecy and silence, pressure to perform, misuse of scripture or the pulpit to control behaviour, demands for obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuse has a "divine" origin, and isolation from others, especially those outside the abusive context.[7]

In France, the cover-up of abuse, particularly within the so-called "*communautés nouvelles*," led to further understanding of spiritual abuse, such as the studies on the Community of St John[8] and the abuse perpetrated by Jean Vanier,[9] as well as the publications by Dysmas de Lassus[10] and Céline Hoyeau.[11]

In Germany, the situation is as follows: Inge Tempelmann was the first to address the issue with her book published in 2007, *Geistlicher Missbrauch. Auswege aus frommer Gewalt* (*Spiritual Abuse: Ways Out of Pious Violence*),[12] which focuses on evangelical church contexts. In the Catholic Church, discussion and research into spiritual abuse began later. Particular mention should be made of the work of Doris Reisinger (née Wagner) with her book *Spiritueller Missbrauch in der katholischen Kirche* (*Spiritual Abuse within the Catholic Church*), published in 2019.[13] Reisinger's description and definition of spiritual abuse can be described as a "game-changer," triggering a broad discussion on the topic within the German Church and theology that continues to this day. The Jesuit Klaus Mertes' actions in 2010 addressed sexual abuse at the Canisius College in Berlin, thus exposing the cover-up of abuse in the Catholic Church (the so-called

[7] Oakley and Kinmond, *Breaking the Silence*, 21–22.

[8] Interdisciplinary Commission of the Brothers of Saint John, *Understanding and Healing. Origins and Analyses of Abuse within the Saint John Family*, 2023, https://freres-saint-jean.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/06/Comprendre_et_Guerir_Juin_2023.pdf. All online resources were last accessed on March 20, 2026.

[9] Bernard Granger, Nicole Jeammet, Florian Michel, Antoine Mourges, Gwennola Rimbaut, and Claire Vincent-Mory, *Control and Abuse. Investigation into Thomas Philippe, Jean Vanier and L'Arche (1950–2019)*, Study Commission commissioned by L'Arche International, 2023,
https://commissiondetude-jeanvanier.org/commissiondetudeindependante2023-empriseetabus/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Report_Control-and-Abuse_EN.pdf.

[10] De Lassus, *Verheißung und Verrat*.

[11] Céline Hoyeau, *La trahison des pères. Emprise et abus des fondateurs de communautés nouvelles* (Montrouge: Bayard, 2021).

[12] Inge Tempelmann, *Geistlicher Missbrauch: Auswege aus frommer Gewalt – Ein Handbuch für Betroffene und Berater* (Holzgerlingen: Hänssler, 2018).

[13] Doris Wagner, *Spiritueller Missbrauch in der katholischen Kirche* (Freiburg: Herder, 2019).

"abuse crisis")—also analysed the destructive dimension of the spiritual aspect in cases of abuse.[14]

In 2020, the book *Erzählen als Widerstand* (*Narrative as Resistance*) was published. In this book, 23 women, writing under pseudonyms, recount their experience of sexual and/or spiritual abuse as adults within the Catholic Church.[15] The topic is explored in great depth. This publication sparked wide-ranging discussion, from which three key insights can be drawn:

- Adults, too, are victims of spiritual and sexual abuse. This must be emphasised because there is a tendency to focus one-sidedly on minors as victims, and within this group, specifically on male adolescents. In studies commissioned by German dioceses, abuse of adult women is rarely addressed and, in some cases, is excluded from the outset by the study design. This leads to a one-sided perception of the abuse issue. Adult victims, and in particular women, do not feature. This constitutes a hermeneutical injustice towards this group of victims.
- Sexual and spiritual abuse are closely linked. When victims describe how the sexual abuse began, this is in most cases accompanied by a spiritual framing. However, spiritual abuse also exists without any connection to sexual abuse. It is a no less damaging occurrence that constitutes a distinct offence in its own right.
- Spiritual abuse without a link to sexual abuse is a distinct phenomenon with its own typical patterns—a description of which follows below.

In the field of theological research, a number of relevant publications have appeared in Germany in recent years. For example, a major empirical research project is currently underway at the University of Münster, in which spiritual abuse is being investigated in two communities under the direction of Prof. Dr Judith Könemann; the project is funded by the German Bishops' Conference and the dioceses involved in the abuse cases. It is the first major project of its kind to focus exclusively on spiritual abuse. Results are expected in autumn 2026. At the University of Regensburg, a research focus has developed on the topic of abuse of adults, encompassing studies on spiritual abuse, abuse within religious communities, gender issues in abuse research, and the hidden patterns of abuse.[16]

[14] Klaus Mertes, "Geistlicher Missbrauch. Theologische Anmerkungen," *Stimmen der Zeit* no. 2 (2019): 13–22.

[15] Barbara Haslbeck, Regina Heyder, Ute Leimgruber and Dorothee Sandherr-Klemp, eds., *Erzählen als Widerstand. Berichte über sexuellen und spirituellen Missbrauch an erwachsenen Frauen in der katholischen Kirche* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2020).

[16] For further information see: https://missbrauchsmuster.de/.

This brief overview of relevant publications on the subject of spiritual abuse illustrates the extent to which both perceptions and the state of research within theology have evolved in recent years. Intensive academic engagement with the topic is increasing. The growing number of publications, empirical studies and reflections indicates that spiritual abuse is now recognised as a distinct field of research. This development has given rise to more nuanced conceptual clarification alongside a growing sensitivity to the specific dynamics of power, authority and dependency in religious contexts. It is thus evident that both awareness of the problem and the academic exploration of the topic within theological research has increased in recent years.

The Issue of Spiritual Abuse in the German Church

Significant developments have also taken place within ecclesiastical discourse in the dioceses, as well as in religious orders and spiritual communities. In particular, within the context of intra-church reform debates, institutional processes of reckoning with the past, and increased pastoral reflection, a more intensive engagement with the topic of spiritual abuse can be observed. The following section will focus on the discussion and thematic developments within the Church in Germany.

The discussion on spiritual abuse has had an impact on the "Synodal Path" of the German Catholic Church. The Synodal Path is a reform and dialogue process within the Catholic Church in Germany, initiated in 2019 by the German Bishops' Conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics to address the structural causes of abuse of power and, in particular, the background to the cases of sexualised abuse revealed by the MHG study.[17] Two developments illustrate how the pressure triggered by the discussion on the topic of spiritual abuse led to concrete consequences: Firstly, since 2021 there has been a contact point supported by the German Bishops' Conference to which people who have experienced various forms of abuse as adults can turn. This stems from the realisation that situations of abuse in adulthood (which in many cases includes spiritual abuse) require specific advisory and legal expertise that is not necessarily available in the dioceses when dealing with the issue of sexual abuse of minors. Secondly, in 2023, the German Bishops' Conference published a working guide on the topic "Abuse of Spiritual Authority: Dealing with Spiritual Abuse."[18] The guide clarifies terminology, presents indicators of spiritual abuse, calls for the establishment of

[17] In several synodal assemblies, bishops and laypeople jointly discussed reform issues in four key areas: power and the separation of powers in the Church, the priestly way of life (in particular celibacy), the role of women in church offices, and the Church's sexual morality.

[18] Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, ed., *Arbeitshilfe: Missbrauch geistlicher Autorität. Zum Umgang mit geistlichem Missbrauch* (Bonn: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, 2023), DBK Shop: https://www.dbk-shop.de/de/publikationen/arbeitshilfen/missbrauch-geistlicher-autoritaet-zum-umgang-geistlichem-missbrauch.html.

contact points for victims in every diocese, and outlines possible interventions. The requirements described in the guide are currently being implemented at varying speeds across the German dioceses.

The issue of spiritual abuse sparks heated debate. Whilst some dismiss it as a "trendy topic" intended to harm the Church, others are highly sensitive to the matter. There is a great demand for training courses for persons responsible for spiritual direction and for those in charge of formation within communities. The discussion surrounding spiritual abuse poses a particular challenge within religious orders and communities. There are communities that completely reject the topic, ignoring or denying its existence, just as there are those that engage with it openly. Conflicts typically arise between the generations, as what older members of a community still perceive as normal—for instance, regarding obedience—is no longer acceptable to younger members. Much like the issue of sexual abuse, spiritual abuse also evokes many emotions that make a sober and victim-centred approach and attitude difficult. Added to this is the lack of canonical regulations. However, an increased awareness of the problem can also be observed at the level of the universal Church. In November 2024, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith published a draft proposal to introduce a canonical offence for spiritual abuse and "false mysticism." The working group comprises representatives from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Legislative Texts.[19]

Patterns of Spiritual Abuse Based on a Victim's Report

In recent years, many reports[20] from victims of spiritual abuse have been published in Germany. The result of these publications is that the patterns of abuse can now be described and identified. It is alarming to realise that, despite their individuality, the reports are often similar. It seems as though there is a "hidden script" behind the events. The acts of the perpetrators, the systemic context and instrumentalised spiritual ideals interact to form a breeding ground for abuse. In the field of sexual abuse, it is already known that factors can be identified within the abuse situations which provide a set of tools for recognising the onset of sexual abuse. Prevention training courses describe the high-risk situations, the perpetrators' strategies and typical scenarios. It is also the case with spiritual abuse that typical patterns recur.

[19] Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *False Mysticism and Spiritual Abuse* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20241122_falso-misticismo-e-abuso-spirituale_en.html.

[20] Haslbeck et al., *Erzählen als Widerstand*; Barbara Haslbeck, Ute Leimgruber, Regina Nagel and Philippa Rath, eds., *Selbstverlust und Gottentfremdung. Spiritueller Missbrauch an Frauen in der katholischen Kirche* (Ostfildern: Patmos, 2023); Birgit Abele, *Wieder ich selbst. Mein Weg aus dem Gefängnis spirituellen Missbrauchs* (Freiburg: Herder, 2024).

Ute Leimgruber heads the research focus on abuse of adults, particularly women, in the Catholic Church at the University of Regensburg. She speaks of the "hidden patterns of abuse" and analyses them.[21] Hidden patterns have emerged in the analysis of abuse of adults in the Catholic Church. First and foremost is the fact that abuse of adults, and particularly women, is scarcely mentioned in previous studies on abuse in the Church, partly because it rarely appears in the files. Little attention has been and continues to be paid to the testimonies of victims, which must be regarded as testimonial injustice. Because the victims were not minors, they are not mentioned; they are either accused of complicity or pathologised. Victim blaming is a recurring theme in the reports of victims. Once again, the problem is shifted onto them, rather than identifying the vulnerance of the setting and the role of the spiritual director.[22]

The following section outlines typical patterns of spiritual abuse based on a victim's report. In the book *Selbstverlust und Gottentfremdung* (*Loss of Self and Alienation from God*), a woman writing under the pseudonym Elaia Merced recounts her experiences.[23] Her testimony illustrates the typical processes of grooming, the systemic context, and the psychological mechanisms and consequences of spiritual abuse. To understand these dynamics, the situation is presented narratively, incorporating quotes from her account. This case study simultaneously serves to highlight characteristic patterns of spiritual abuse.

How Spiritual Abuse Begins

It all begins with a very typical situation: a young woman is studying and, in the process of leaving her parents' home, is searching for her own path. She is enthusiastic about her faith and is considering a professional path in the Church. It is about nothing less than the great question of vocation. To find it, she is prepared to give her all. She volunteers in a Christian community and, within the university parish, meets a priest who gathers a group of particularly interested students around him. The student is fascinated by the charismatic man, who takes a great deal of time to talk with her. She experiences this situation as follows:

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[21] A detailed analysis can be found here: Ute Leimgruber, *Was Missbrauch an Frauen ermöglicht und warum er nicht als solcher erkannt wird* (Ostfildern: Grünewald, 2026).

[22] Vulnerance is a concept introduced by German theologian Hildegund Keul, expanded on by Ute Leimgruber, used to describe the structural readiness to use violence in connection with vulnerabilities. Vulnerance describes how institutional factors within religious communities—hierarchical power structures, cultures of secrecy, and the weaponization of concepts like the vow of obedience and "God's will"—create systematic conditions where abuse becomes not just possible, but structurally enabled.

[23] Elaia Merced, "Nebel, Leere, Lähmung," in *Selbstverlust und Gottentfremdung*, ed. Barbara Haslbeck et al. (Ostfildern: Patmos, 2023), 114–25. For the following quotations from the report, the page number immediately following the quotation is given. Translation from the German original by the author of this chapter.

> Never before had anyone taken such an interest in my spiritual search, my involvement in the Church and my desire to shape my life out of faith, and never before had I felt so understood in this as I did by him. He shared much of his own search for a vocation with me and spoke very openly about himself, and it touched me and, in a way, honoured me too that he opened up to me like that. (…) To me, he felt like a gift from heaven, like a messenger of God who had been sent to accompany me on my journey and to help me find a direction for my life in faith.[24]

That is the beginning. Looking at reports from victims, it can be observed that abuse occurs where either longing or need is great. Many victims later realise that their longing and/or need was exploited. Church pastoral care services are aimed at people facing difficult life situations, whether grief, illness, crises or life transitions. Vocation ministry represents a personalised service that appeals to people who are searching. The desire to find guidance for life through faith makes one vulnerable. People who have experienced spiritual abuse in such contexts realise in hindsight that as dependent and inexperienced individuals, they were particularly susceptible to manipulation. The vulnerability of those seeking pastoral care is countered by the vulnerance—the potential to cause harm—of the service itself. In pastoral care and spiritual direction, there is a difference in roles between the professionals and those seeking pastoral care. Dependent individuals place their trust because they assume they are in a safe setting. This unquestioning trust can be exploited by clerics and spiritual directors to bind people to themselves and instrumentalise them for their own narcissistic needs. It is not the trust of the dependent individuals that is the problem, but the professionals' lack of reflection on their roles. Their duty as clerics, superiors or directors is to handle the power associated with their role in a reflective and responsible manner.

The early stages of spiritual abuse also include "love-bombing," as described by Elaia Merced: the priest's charismatic presence captivates the young woman. The offer is appealing. The spiritual mentor takes time for her, and there is a positive atmosphere within the intensive religious group. It is something special to belong. For newcomers, it feels wonderful to be part of an important mission, to be in the front row, to have contact with prominent figures. Looking back, some say they felt "as if they were in love." The "love-bombing" temporarily boosts self-esteem and influences perception. Typically, a kind of "guru factor" also comes into play. Charismatic leaders take centre stage—this is not gender-specific. In cases of spiritual abuse in particular, women also act as perpetrators.

[24] Merced, "Nebel, Leere, Lähmung," 114–15.

Pressure to Perform

Elaia Merced is in close contact with the priest via email and WhatsApp. He writes her pages of personal messages day and night, in breach of all the rules governing professional spiritual direction. Spiritual direction takes up more and more space in the student's life. She attends church services and group meetings. Added to this are spiritual exercises that take up a great deal of time. The initial enthusiasm is gradually replaced by pressure, as Elaia Merced describes:

> The priest said that he was praying for me, that I might recognise God's truth and find harmony with it. However, to do so, I would have to cast aside my own petty earthly desires, my human notions, my postmodern understanding of justice and my liberal aspirations, and surrender myself unreservedly to God's will.[25]

To belong to the group of the chosen ones, she is expected to change and achieve exceptional feats. This happens subtly and over a prolonged period. The young woman learns to put her own needs aside. This is supposed to help her progress on the spiritual path. Her studies take a back seat, if only because the new spiritual programme takes up so much of her time. Added to this are tasks for the spiritual director and the group, which are interpreted as missionary service.

The pressure to perform spiritually implements a dualistic image of God. On the one hand, God is the loving Being who accepts, redeems and heals people; on the other hand, for God's sake, people must shed their own ego and surrender unreservedly to God's guidance. What God's guidance means for the individual is known to the spiritual director, who has long since made themselves indispensable. The spiritual becomes the rationale for the performance required. The individual becomes a small cog in a system that must function. Being a good Christian means fulfilling certain conditions. People who have experienced spiritual abuse within closed, toxic groups report that their willingness to surrender their own will was also exploited for labour. They worked to the point of physical and mental breakdown, supposedly in the name of God and to fulfil Jesus' mission.

The Thought Reform

For months, Elaia Merced pursued the goal of reducing her own earthly desires so as not to be regarded as "selfish," as the priest interprets it. This weakens her sense of self. Gradually, she adopts the ideals and norms of her spiritual director. Her social circle has narrowed, as she moves exclusively within the small group of the chosen ones. Her soul and body react to the increasing isolation and narrowing of her thoughts. She is barely able to cope with her daily tasks and strug-

[25] Merced, "Nebel, Leere, Lähmung," 118–19.

gles with feelings of emptiness and paralysis, with concentration problems, dizziness, nausea and stomach cramps. She confides this to the spiritual director, and he responds as follows:

> He interprets the psychosomatic symptoms as a process of spiritual growth, pointing to saints who had to endure illness and dark times in order to mature spiritually. In particular, he repeatedly refers to members of religious orders and suggests again that he considers joining a religious order to be the right path for me.[26]

What is happening here is described in research on cult-like groups as "thought reform."[27] Spiritual concepts are employed alongside subtle psychological pressure. The ordinary aspects of life are spiritualised and thus become a weapon in the struggle to break one's own will. In concrete terms, this might look like this: stomachache is interpreted as a sign of a process of maturing in faith. Sleep deprivation is a sign of obedience. This spiritual framing can apply to everyday matters, such as which seat at the table of the community a person is permitted to occupy. It can also concern life decisions, such as questions of vocation, way of life and choice of partner. It is not the person who decides on a particular course of action, but rather they must submit to the supposed will of God. In many cases, underlying these spiritualisations are conflicts between people, which are effectively resolved for those in power by invoking God. This conditioning leads to a kind of reshaping of thought, non-violently, and over a long period of time. What happens is exactly what the title of the book in which Elaia Merced's report appeared describes: loss of self and alienation from God. The connection to one's true self is severed. The person loses trust in their own perception and adopts the viewpoint of those on whom they depend. Psychologically speaking, this constitutes spiritual gaslighting. The manipulative influence destroys trust in one's own judgement.[28] The sense of conscience is lost, which is why Samuel Fernandez from Chile rightly refers to spiritual abuse as "abuse of conscience."[29]

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[26] Merced, "Nebel, Leere, Lähmung," 119.

[27] For an overview of this, see Barbara Haslbeck, "Kreise, die wie Sekten funktionieren. Zusammenhänge von spirituellem Missbrauch und sektenähnlichen Gruppierungen," in *Spirituellen Missbrauch verstehen. Wissenschaftliche Essays zu Selbstverlust und Gottentfremdung*, ed. Ute Leimgruber and Barbara Haslbeck (Ostfildern: Grünewald, 2024), 111–28.

[28] For further details, see Magdalena Hürten, "Epistemische Aspekte spirituellen Missbrauchs. Toxische Verknüpfungen von Wissen, Macht und Geschlecht," in *Spirituellen Missbrauch verstehen. Wissenschaftliche Essays zu Selbstverlust und Gottentfremdung*, ed. Ute Leimgruber and Barbara Haslbeck (Ostfildern: Grünewald, 2024), 37–50.

[29] Samuel Fernández, "Towards a Definition of Abuse of Conscience," *Gregorianum* no. 102 (2021): 557–74, https://doi.org/10.32060/Gregorianum.102/3.2021.557-574.

One of the typical characteristics of spiritual abuse is the increasing alienation from the world outside the religious group, brought about by the reshaping of one's thoughts. A black-and-white worldview leads to increasing isolation from one's former life and heightens the willingness to make life changes and start afresh in the name of God. The focus on the religious group increases control over the individual.[30] The likelihood of encountering ideas and ways of life other than those within one's own group becomes increasingly slim.

The Consequences

Elaia Merced reacts to the increasing spiritual absorption with clear physical and psychological symptoms:

> My diary also bears witness to how I mention these psychosomatic complaints with increasing frequency. How I pray to still be able to cope with my daily tasks, for I am developing concentration problems and a heaviness and sadness, as well as a sense of inner turmoil, which cast a shadow over my life. The words "a foggy feeling in my head," "emptiness" and "paralysis" run like a thread through my diary entries from this period.[31]

The report concludes with her leaving the city where she was studying following a complete physical and mental breakdown. In her the realisation dawns "how many thoughts in my head were not my own, and how I no longer knew who I was at all." The reports of victims show that physical symptoms are often the first warning signs. As the initiation into the new life progresses and the associated thought reform takes hold, victims become increasingly unaware of the loss of their own perception and sense of self. Spiritual abuse, much like sexual abuse, can have a traumatic effect on victims.[32] It is an attack on the innermost self, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

Outlook

The discussion of spiritual abuse leads theology and the Church to the very heart of faith. It becomes clear just how great the dangers of manipulation and the abuse of spiritual power are. The issue calls for a new and urgently needed reflection on roles and quality in pastoral care. In their 2022 statement on pastoral care, "*In*

[30] See Stephanie Butenkemper, "We are family. In den Fängen toxischer Gemeinschaften," *Lebendige Seelsorge* no. 3 (2023): 179–83.

[31] Merced, "Nebel, Leere, Lähmung," 119.

[32] See Michael Utsch, "Religiöse Traumatisierung und spiritueller Missbrauch," Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen (EZW), EZW website, https://www.ezw-berlin.de/publikationen/artikel/religioese-traumatisierung-und-spiritueller-missbrauch/.

der Seelsorge schlägt das Herz der Kirche" (*In Pastoral Care Beats the Heart of the Church*), the German bishops addressed the danger of spiritual abuse and emphasised the need for those in pastoral care to reflect on their role: "Pastoral carers must have internalised the limitations and relational nature of their own work. Their primary and essential task is therefore that of a mediator: to facilitate or deepen the encounter between God and those seeking pastoral care, and to accompany them."[33] Taking this mediating role seriously, reflecting on one's own role and freeing it from manipulative elements is a fundamental challenge for all those working in pastoral care. Engaging with the issue of spiritual abuse leads to an improved quality of care that respects people's boundaries and enables spiritual freedom.

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[33] Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, ed., *In der Seelsorge schlägt das Herz der Kirche: Wort der deutschen Bischöfe zur Seelsorge* (Bonn: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, 2022), 45, DBK Shop: https://www.dbk-shop.de/de/publikationen/die-deutschen-bischoefe/hirtenschreiben-erklaerungen/in-seelsorge-schlaegt-herz-kirche-wort-deutschen-bischoefe-seelsorge.html.

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MORAL INJURY AND CLERICAL SEX OFFENDERS

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Abstract

This chapter makes use of interview data with four Australian Marist brothers and four former brothers who had abused children, to explore ways in which they felt betrayed by those in authority, and how their experiences as Marist brothers, and the Marist culture and system—as well as Australian society and the Church's theology and culture—may have contributed to their abuse. Here, I describe the emerging category of moral injury (MI) and identify ways in which it is similar to and different from post-traumatic stress disorder. I make use of Marie Keenan's research with priests and brothers who abused, her analysis of the formation cultures they experienced as young men, and the ecclesial culture which she described as "organised irresponsibility." I make use of the interviews to explore different aspects of MI that show how the participants felt betrayed by someone in authority, perpetrated acts which transgressed their personal beliefs and values while knowing that what they did was wrong, and that they felt betrayed by the Marist culture and system. I identify Catholic teaching on homosexuality, masturbation and mortal sin, the culture of perfectionism, and the vow of obedience, as factors that contributed to their abusive behaviour. Other people who suffer from MI, for example military or medical personnel, or first responders, were acting as a result of training for roles which led to experiences of MI. In contrast, no one ever expected or intentionally created a context wherein a Marist brother or a priest would abuse a child. Despite this important caveat, I conclude, following Mescher, that MI can encompass victims, bystanders, and perpetrators and that it adds to our understanding of the complex and tragic phenomenon of clergy sexual abuse.

Keywords: Moral injury; clergy sexual abuse; clerical offenders; Marist Brothers; priestly and religious formation; spiritual abuse; moral theology.

Introduction

The child sex abuse crisis of the early twenty-first century was one of the most significant events in the history of the Catholic Church. Massimo Faggioli (2018) described it as "the most serious crisis in 500 years."[1] While there were reports of abuse—particularly in English-speaking countries—in the 1980s and 1990s, the revelation of the abuse in the Archdiocese of Boston in 2002—and the scale of the abuse—created a media sensation which led to a major scandal in the Catholic Church in the United States which became an international news event. This was followed by similar revelations and reports in Ireland, Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, and then in Germany, the Netherlands, and other European countries, including countries with a high percentage of Catholics in the population like Belgium, Italy, Spain and Poland.

The media took the lead in reporting, leading to a Pulitzer Prize Public Service Award in 2003 for the reporters of the Boston Globe. Psychiatrists, psychologists and criminologists undertook important academic studies, and responsible journalists and Catholic commentators filled many column inches with insightful articles reporting the abuse. For the media—responsible and sensational—the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church was the gift that kept on giving, as each hierarchy seemed incapable of learning the lessons from other bishops' conferences and moved from denial, criticism of journalists, minimization and cover-up, to the realisation that transparency and opening up archives to researchers was the only way through this unprecedented crisis.

Paradoxically, theology—the Church's intellectual space for critical thinking and reflection—appeared to have come late to the table. Fleming, Keenan and Zollner, in the introduction to their edited collection, *Doing Theology and Theological Ethics in the Face of the Abuse Crisis*, asked, "Why have our efforts in theology and theological ethics been so slow to wrestle with this crisis?" They go on to ask, "How are theology and theological ethics implicated in this crisis?" and "How might the disciplines be constructive in responding?"[2] Marcus Mescher, in his chapter in this important edited volume, proposed that "moral injury serves as a crucial interpretive framework for understanding the interpersonal, intrapersonal and transpersonal moral anguish caused by clergy sexual abuse and its cover up."[3] In his chapter, Mescher applies the concept of moral

[1] Massimo Faggioli, "The Catholic Church's Biggest Crisis Since the Reformation," *Foreign Affairs,* October 11, 2018.

[2] Daniel J. Fleming, James F. Keenan, and Hans Zollner, "Introduction," in *Doing Theology and Theological Ethics in the Face of the Abuse Crisis*, ed. Daniel J. Fleming, James F. Keenan, and Hans Zollner (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023).

[3] Marcus Mescher, "Clergy Sexual Abuse as Moral Injury: Confronting a Wounded and Wounding Church," in *Doing Theology and Theological Ethics in the Face of the Abuse Crisis*, ed. Daniel J. Fleming, James F. Keenan, and Hans Zollner (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023), 122, https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.72061.

injury to victims of clerical abuse and argues that it affected the Church as an institution.

In this chapter I will begin by noting an important change in the thinking about clerical abuse in the Catholic Church. I will then examine the new discipline of moral injury, which Mescher applied to victims of clerical abuse, and I will apply it to perpetrators of clerical child abuse, examining ways in which some of the perpetrators can themselves be considered as victims of a Church system which betrayed them in a range of ways. I will make use of research that I undertook with members of the Marist Brothers in Australia, the religious order of which I am a member, in 2020–22. I will also make use of the report of a Round Table Discussion which was held in May 2017 to help the Marist Brothers in Australia to engage with the topic of abuse by their own brothers. I will conclude by looking at ways that moral injury is also limited when applied to clerical sex offenders.

The problem of the abuse of children by clerics is not new in the Catholic Church. The abuse of boys by men was mentioned, for example, in the Didache, an early second-century Church document. Until recently, the Church tended to view this behaviour as an example of same-sex behaviour between men (which was seen as sinful and an example of pathology) and condemned it as a moral failing. There were, for example, three incidents of sexual abuse of boys during the foundation period of the Marist Brothers (1817–30). These were referred to as "a shameful fall," and examples of "the impure vice."[4] They were also referred to as "*une affaire de mœurs*," which can be translated as "a moral case." Understanding the abuse of children primarily as a moral matter was criticized in the National Review Board's *Report on the Crisis in the Catholic Church in the United States*: "In the 1950s and early 1960s, many Church leaders viewed sexual abuse as a moral lapse only and did not understand the psychological causes and consequences of such conduct."[5]

This tendency to view child abuse by clerics as a moral lapse also led to a disregard for the impact of the abuse on the victims and their families. This attitude changed in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, in 1985, Fr Gilbert Gauthe of the Diocese of Lafayette in Louisiana, USA, received a prison sentence of 20 years after pleading guilty to a range of crimes, and an investigation into sexual abuse by Christian Brothers at Mount Cashel orphanage in Canada (1990) led to the growing awareness that child abuse by clergy was a crime and not simply a moral failing. Between 1989 and 1993, nine Canadian Christian brothers were found guilty of crimes related to the abuse of children.

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[4] Jean-Baptiste Furet, *Life of Blessed Marcellin Joseph Benedict Champagnat (1789–1840): Marist Priest, Founder of the Congregation of the Little Brothers of Mary*, Bicentenary ed., trans. Brother Ludovic Burke (Rome: Marist Brothers General House, 1989).

[5] National Review Board for the Protection of Children and Young People, *A Report on the Crisis in the Catholic Church in the United States* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004), 93–94.

Moral Injury

The category of "moral injury" developed in the United States as a way of describing the impact of the Vietnam War on veterans who may or may not have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but whose experience was not fully captured by this psychiatric diagnosis. Moral injury focused on the sense of betrayal and spiritual and moral woundedness which appeared to be lacking in the strict psychiatric definition of PTSD. This will be discussed at more length below. One of the advantages of engaging with moral injury is that it is a relative newcomer to discourse about morality and suffering, and, as such, has new perspectives to offer to discussion and reflection on child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, which can help the Church to move on from the apparent state of theological stasis identified by Fleming, Keenan and Zollner in 2023.[6]

The concept of moral injury is associated with Dr Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist who worked with Vietnam veterans, many of whom had been diagnosed with PTSD, although Dr Camillo Mac Bica, a Vietnam veteran and philosopher, is credited with having first coined the term. Shay identified three characteristics which he believed constituted moral injury, based on listening to the veterans with whom he worked:

- A betrayal of what's right
- By someone who holds legitimate authority
- In a high-stakes situation.

Moral injury has undergone considerable development since Shay's first formulation of the characteristics, as he identified them. It continues to evolve, and the focus of moral injury has been extended beyond the military to a range of situations where people suffer existential, moral, religious, social and spiritual wounds that affect their identity, their relationships with themselves, others, and God, and which damage their sense of morality and well-being. It has been applied to first responders, veterinary surgeons, medical personnel in situations where they are

[6] In addition to *Doing Theology and Theological Ethics in the Face of the Abuse Crisis*, the following works have contributed to this ongoing reflection, and are examples of the development of theologies of safeguarding in the Catholic Church: John H. Sheveland, ed., *Theology in a Post-Traumatic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023); Pat Jones, Marcus M. Pound, and Catherine Sexton, *The Cross of the Moment* (Durham: Centre for Catholic Studies, Durham University, 2024), chaps. 5–8; Nicholas Peter Harvey and Linda Woodhead, *Unknowing God: Toward a Post-Abusive Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022); and Lluís Oviedo, "Does Faulty Theology Play a Role in the Abuse Crisis?," in *The Abuse of Minors in the Catholic Church*, ed. Anthony J. Blasi and Lluís Oviedo (New York: Routledge, 2020).

limited in their possible responses to patients,[7] and cannot "uphold their core values and beliefs."[8] Examples include nursing staff during COVID,[9] and victims of abuse and exploitation.[10] Michael Robinson, a young historian in England, has also begun to apply the concept of moral injury to soldiers who returned from WWI, to a "land fit for heroes," who were then deeply disappointed when faced with poverty, unemployment, and poor housing.

Brett T. Litz et al. defined moral injury as "perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs,"[11] extending the definition to include betrayal of personal moral values and being a bystander. Litz's definition makes the personal moral consequences of engaging in behaviours that "transgress deeply held moral beliefs" explicit.[12] They give the examples of armed attacks on the enemy, injuring or killing women or children, or being instructed to execute enemy soldiers who had surrendered. For others, the experience of viewing dead or mutilated bodies or having to handle them can also constitute moral injury. Witnessing the wrongdoing of others can also lead to moral injury, with the sense of turning a blind eye to, colluding with or being complicit in acts which contravene personal moral standards. Jonathan Shay gives the example of doing nothing to protect a junior service member who is the focus of sexual coercion by a senior officer.[13] Priests and religious who had suspicions or evidence of the abusive behaviour of clergy who were later found guilty of abuse, can be affected in the same way. Nash, a Navy psychiatrist,[14] added that such moral commitments are "communally shared," suggesting that

[7] Nuala Kenny, "Uncharted Territory: Hippocratic Ethics and Health Systems," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 174, no. 10 (May 2006): 1385.

[8] Christian Anthony Archer, "Expanding Moral Injury: Why Resilience Training Won't Fix It," *JAMA* 328, no. 12 (September 27, 2022): 1199–1200, https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2022.15721.

[9] Victoria Williamson, Dominic Murphy, Andrea Phelps, David Forbes, and Neil Greenberg, "Moral Injury: The Effect on Mental Health and Its Implications for Treatment," *The Lancet Psychiatry* 8, no. 6 (2021): 453–55, https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(21)00113-9.

[10] Marcus Mescher, "Toward a Taxonomy of Moral Injury: Confronting Harm Caused by Clergy Sexual Abuse," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 43, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2023): 75–91.

[11] Brett T. Litz, Nathan Stein, Eileen Delaney, Leslie Lebowitz, William P. Nash, Caroline Silva, and Shira Maguen, "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy," *Clinical Psychology Review* 29, no. 8 (December 2009): 695, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2009.07.003.

[12] Litz et al., "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans," 696.

[13] Jonathan Shay, "Moral Injury," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 31, no. 2 (2014): 182–91, at 185.

[14] Christopher Hansen, "A New Theological Anthropology for Developing Resiliency and Healing from Combat," *Theology and Science* 17, no. 1 (2019): 107–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2019.1557809.

the betrayal and violation challenge shared assumptions that are part of a group's belief system and culture.

The idea of moral injury evolved partly due to the perceived inadequacies of the psychiatric diagnosis of PTSD. Shay notes that PTSD captures ways that the initial injury or experience(s) continue to re-present themselves in the life of the person after the danger has passed (intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, hypervigilance, anxiety, etc.).[15] Shay suggests, however, that it is the sense of moral injury—betrayal, shame, guilt, persistent feelings of worthlessness and changed moral identity—which leads to depression, suicidality and violence. Authors like Litz et al. have identified similarities and differences between PTSD and moral injury.[16] Jamieson et al. provide a Venn diagram with a comprehensive description of what they identify as symptoms of moral injury, symptoms of PTSD and overlapping symptoms.[17] Any such diagrams are open to discussion and, for the moment, provide hypotheses for ongoing research and analysis. Among the symptoms of moral injury, Jamieson et al. list the violation of deeply held moral beliefs, violation of conscience, damage to a sense of religious and spiritual purpose, self-blame, guilt and shame, self-condemnation, self-sabotage, and a sense of unforgivability. They also propose that moral injury is less likely to be related to life-threatening events. Based on reading a selection of research articles published during the past ten years, it is possible to say that a consensus has emerged around the following points:

Table 1: Characteristics of PTSD and Moral Injury

PTSD	**Moral Injury**	**Author(s)**
Characterised by fear	Characterised by shame	Litz et al. 2009
Threat-based injury	Values-based injury	Hansen 2019
Feelings of fear and helplessness	Feelings of guilt, shame and anger	Hansen 2019

Where PTSD is seen as a threat-based injury leading to anxiety and hypervigilance, characterised by feelings of fear and helplessness, moral injury is seen as a values-based injury, characterised by pervasive feelings of shame, guilt, and anger. There are people affected by moral injury who also suffer from PTSD, and

[15] Shay, "Moral Injury."

[16] See Sonya B. Norman and Shira Maguen, "Moral Injury," *PTSD: National Center for PTSD*, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/cooccurring/moral_injury.asp

[17] Nikki Jamieson, Myfanwy Maple, Dorothy Ratnarajah, and Kim Usher, "Military Moral Injury: A Concept Analysis," *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing* 29, no. 6 (December 2020): 1052, https://doi.org/10.1111/inm.12792.

there are people who have not been diagnosed with PTSD but who suffer from an existential, social, spiritual and relational malaise which can best be captured by the construct of moral injury. One of the advantages of the category of moral injury is that it avoids the pathologisation of distress—which can be stigmatising—while providing ideas, dimensions, a vocabulary, and a basis in research which can provide understanding for a significant aspect of human suffering.

Moral Injury and Victims of Clerical Abuse

Mescher's chapter focuses on the harm done to victims, and he extends his discussion to ways in which the whole Church can be seen as morally injured.[18] He refers to a "sinful ecclesial culture" and writes that "moral injury pervades the entire institution."[19] His discussion of moral injury as applied to victims focuses on five areas: identity and self-image, personal agency, moral perception, relationships, and the institutional credibility of the Church. Mescher refers to Shay's criterion of a "high-stakes situation," and suggests that the damage that can be done to an individual's self-image, sense of vulnerability, feeling of safety in the Church and the world, indicates that for these individuals, abuse by a priest or brother is a high-stakes situation. Individuals can ask existential questions about the nature of God and the Church, the loss of a sense of being valued and cared for, and they can experience a heightened sense of vulnerability which affects their identity. Their suffering is often compounded when people in positions of leadership minimize their suffering or do not believe them.

The experience of abuse can undermine their sense of right and wrong, leading to confusion about who to trust and who can be believed. They can lose trust in their bodies and natural reactions when abused by a person in whom they had confidence, but who intrudes on areas of personal and bodily privacy. This can lead to questioning of what is right. Mescher identifies "diminished agency" in victims and notes the high levels of mental health problems—including suicide—among victims of clerical abuse. This diminished agency has its impact on their relationships, and many victims of abuse experience difficulties in trusting others, and in being comfortable in their sexual lives as adults.

Lastly, Mescher highlights the impact of clerical abuse on the faith life and religious adherence of victims, many of whom reject the Church as a result of the abuse. Others find that the institution which preached love and care then treated them as almost the enemy. Church leaders often responded to their legitimate concerns with delays, withholding documents, and using obstructionist tactics when faced with the legitimate requirements of statutory authorities and requests for information, and the use of lawyers to protect the Church and its assets.

These features constitute moral injury. There is a clear betrayal of what is right by the perpetrators and often by people in leadership, causing anguish, a sense of

[18] Mescher, "Clergy Sexual Abuse as Moral Injury," 122–39.
[19] Mescher, "Clergy Sexual Abuse as Moral Injury," 134.

violation of bodily integrity and privacy, with the loss of a sense of sacredness in life from the place which is called to bring Christ's life to others, and manipulation of the goodness of children to satisfy the needs of abusers.

Clerical Offenders as Victims of Moral Injury

While Mescher focused his chapter on the victims of clerical abuse, he also asked, "How do we define a category for moral harm meant to encompass both perpetrators and victims, to say nothing of bystanders and other implicated subjects?"[20] As shown above, he identifies clearly the ways in which moral injury can be applied to victims of clerical abuse. I would like to respond to his question by showing how this category can also be applied to some clerical offenders. I intentionally chose to write "some" clerical offenders, as I want to state clearly that I do not believe that all clerical offenders can be viewed as victims in the way that I will propose.

The publication of Dr Marie Keenan's book *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church* in 2012 was a significant moment for research and writing in the area of clerical child abuse.[21] Keenan's book is built around her research with seven Irish priests and two brothers who abused children. Five of the men were victims of sexual abuse, six were homosexual men, and eight were young men during the 1950s and 1960s. She wrote that all of the participants in her research spoke about their struggles with sexuality, and that sexual sins were the most significant for them. They had difficulties managing loneliness and intimacy, and were aware of a desire for human touch, affection, tenderness, and sexual pleasure. They did not have the skills necessary to manage personal and ministerial boundaries, and one said that the word "boundaries" was unknown to him.[22] They realised that they neglected self-care and that they burned themselves out through overwork. Those who were homosexual were ashamed of their orientation and feared being discovered by others.

Keenan also turned her attention to the Church as an institution and the factors in the organisational structure of the Church, and its theology and discipline, that contributed to the abuse. Among other things, she focused her attention on the commitment to obedience and the fear in which the men lived. For some there was the experience of infantilisation, which compounded their psychosexual problems and kept them at a level of developmental immaturity. Six of the men spoke of unexpressed anger and a felt sense of a lack of personal agency in their lives. They lacked a capacity for self-regulation of their emotional and sexual needs.

[20] Mescher, "Clergy Sexual Abuse as Moral Injury," 129.
[21] Marie Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power and Organizational Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[22] Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church*, 158.

Keenan also suggested that the theology of ontological change bred a sense of entitlement as they felt special and knew that children would defer to their instructions as a result of the authority they held in Irish society. Keenan wrote that the theology of ontological change "is at the heart of what I believe to be problematic," as "it underpins the theology of priesthood and the ecclesiology that it fosters."[23] The theology of ontological change highlights the sense of priests being set apart from other ordinary Catholics, and the process of seminary formation can be seen from an anthropological perspective as a process of gradual separation from their identity as ordinary members of the lay faithful to people who are different (superior) and entitled to special treatment. Tom Doyle, in his submission to the Australian Royal Commission, said that this theology, along with other aspects of clericalism, played a significant role in the abuse crisis by setting "otherwise healthy men apart from ordinary men in an unhealthy manner."[24]

Keenan discusses the role of the confessional. None of the men spoke to a counsellor before discovery but eight of the participants had disclosed their abuse in the confessional. She asks: "Did confession enable the abuse to continue?"[25] All of the participants said that they knew that what they had done was wrong but used a range of rationalizations to justify their behaviour.

Among organisational factors were their ease of access to children and the positions of power they enjoyed because of age, role, clerical status, and authority. The Church's handling of complaints, by denying them or moving the offender, but never reporting to the police, only reinforced the sense of invulnerability of the offenders. They felt "chronically lonely," and Keenan wrote that all adult avenues for sexual and emotional engagement were closed as a result of their vocational choice.

Keenan uses the heading "Organized Irresponsibility" for two of the chapters of her book dealing with aspects of the Church as an institution showing how it impacted on the men who abused, signalling Keenan's belief that the Catholic Church as an organisation, through its theology, system of formation, obedience, perfectionism and lack of support for priests, created the conditions in which these men chose the abuse of children as a way to have their needs met. Perfectionism was problematic as it created expectations of moral and spiritual behaviour which are not possible for human beings. All sexual thoughts and behaviours were considered as sinful. Fear of mortal sin and the constant monitoring of moral behaviour and sexual desire led to a separation from their humanity which, instead of being a place of grace and humility, became a source of anxiety and separation from self. Within this formation, organizational and clerical context,

[23] Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church*, 236.

[24] Tom Doyle, submission to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, quoted in *Final Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, vol. 16, bk. 2, *Religious Institutions* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2017), 620.

[25] Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church*, 166.

Keenan concluded that boundary violations and abuse were "inevitable."[26] She wrote that this was the major thesis of her work.[27]

Keenan concluded from her research and interviews that:

> The pressures to be superhuman and to be "ideal" or "perfect" clergy were only matched by the systemic neglect of the realities of their actual lives, both in their training and afterwards, as they became deferentially loyal and ultimately disloyal soldiers in the business of serving an institution and a Catholic laity in preaching the word of God.[28]

It is noteworthy that Keenan refers to "systemic neglect," which identifies the actual system as a source of moral failing and injury. It is also interesting that she refers to these men as "soldiers" who were serving an institution. The choice of a military image brings us back to the world of the military where the concept of moral injury was first developed. Keenan continued her reflection as follows:

> My belief is that all the men who participated in my research tried to remain good and faithful priests and brothers as they lived in a battlefield of opposing forces of denied sexuality, emotional need, learned rationality, and intellectualization of physical, sexual, and emotional life. When the numerous strategies employed to resolve this war failed … the men … engaged in a complex web of psychological and moral bargaining, built on a rigid adherence to rules and regulations, untouched by human love, to justify their "stealing" sex from children, making children the sacrificial lambs in the continuance of this performance of priesthood.[29]

Again, Keenan's choice of vocabulary is noteworthy: "battlefield," "strategies," "stealing," "performance," "rules." Soldiers who experienced moral injury have spoken about being alienated from themselves as they continued to carry out their duties, while feeling conflicted and hollow on the inside. The training which enabled them to carry out their tasks did not protect them when faced with moral situations where they felt compromised and alone. The priests and brothers who were formed in the Church's theological system in the 1950s and 1960s, often felt alienated from their own humanity—particularly in the area of sexuality and

[26] Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church*, 237, 255.
[27] Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church*, 255.
[28] Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church*, 256.
[29] Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church*, 256.

emotional needs. It is hardly surprising that some, especially in situations of stress, sought to have their needs met in unhealthy and criminal ways.

While Keenan does not use the phrase "moral injury," I hope it has become clear that the experience of these men is consistent with the construct of moral injury as it is emerging in the research and pastoral literature. Their formation insisted on the keeping of certain rules, and provided a framework and theology for sexual and moral behaviour, but it did not equip them to deal with their own sexuality, and their sexual and emotional needs. The abuse of children was understood as a moral failing to be dealt with in confession, but not as a criminal act with damaging psychological and spiritual consequences for the victims.

Results of Australian Research

Marie Keenan's research formed both the motivation and the backdrop to the study I undertook in Australia in 2020 and 2022. The study was undertaken for a Doctorate in Practical Theology at the University of Glasgow in order to guarantee that the study was ethically correct, methodologically sound, and academically rigorous. I interviewed four Marist brothers and four former Marist brothers, all of whom had pleaded guilty to the abuse of children (boys). They had all spent time in prison and had all participated in therapy. Participation was voluntary. I interviewed the participants in February 2020. I returned to Australia in October 2022 and I shared the results of the research. This permitted me to ask if the results were consistent with their own experience, and if they had any further reflections that they wanted to add.

In the course of the interviews[30] I asked about their family background, early years as a Marist brother, formation, the vows, celibacy and the experience of the vow of obedience. I then asked about the circumstances in which the abuse took place, and the factors that they believed contributed to the abuse. I asked about their spiritual lives at the time of the abuse and at the time of the interviews, and the impact of the abuse on their own lives. It is not possible to interview an institution or a system, but it was possible to elicit from the interviews the ways in which Marist life affected the lives of the participants and their personal growth as men.

Clerical Perpetrators as Victims of Moral Injury

If we look at the criteria that have been established for moral injury, I believe that it is possible to regard (some) perpetrators as victims of moral injury at the hands of the religious institutes and dioceses which they joined, and by the Church as a

[30] The interviews were pseudonymised, and each of the men was given a name in alphabetical order: Andrew, Bernard, Christopher, Dennis, Edward, Frank, Grant and Howard.

system. The first characteristic of moral injury identified by Shay is a betrayal of what is right by someone in authority.[31] The participants in the Australia study identified failings of leadership that affected their lives as brothers:

Table 2: A Betrayal of What is Right by Someone in Authority

Participant	**A betrayal of what is right by someone in authority (lack of support)**
Andrew	As in most things, I was not consulted, spoken to, nor supported in very little of my work.
Bernard	There was an attitude … that, "Oh well, they [victims] won't accuse a brother. They might complain about a brother or priest, but it would never go to the police 'cos [the brothers] they're held in so much respect."
Christopher	It was cannon fodder in those days.
Dennis	Formation was a trauma. I'm being trained by people who don't know how to train me.
Edward	I didn't receive any affirmation. You keep stretching a rubber band, its gonna break.
Frank	When I did abuse, I was moved from one place to another. That's the story of the Catholic Church in a way.
Grant	I spoke to the provincial and the priest [about my abusing behaviour] (who told the bishop). Nothing happened. I was supposed to meet a brother in Sydney. He cancelled the meeting. I thought, "What the hell. They are not interested in me."
Howard	There was me trying to deal with being gay and coming to terms with my sexuality. And it was in my face every morning and every evening when I was supervising showers.

As can be seen, lack of consultation, being taken for granted, the excessive work ethic, not being listened to when seeking help, and being put in situations where there was sexual temptation without any support or preparation, constituted a failure and betrayal by leadership in the eyes of the participants.

[31] Shay, "Moral Injury."

Table 3: Perpetrating Acts that Transgressed Personal Beliefs and Values

Participant	**Perpetrating Acts that Transgressed Personal Beliefs and Values**	**Knowing it was Wrong**
Andrew	When they came to sit on my lap it got to the stage where I tickled them … if or when they giggled or laughed, you know, then one goes a bit further.	I knew it was wrong.
Bernard	I therefore looked to the children …for affection. I felt totally inadequate dealing with adults because of my very low self-esteem.	I was aware at the time that it was the wrong thing to do.
Christopher	I thought I was comforting the boy. Obviously, I wasn't. I look at it now and that was just all for my own sort of gratification and need.	And I had this secret side of me which I didn't wanna tell anyone about … So that was, like, a conflicted part of me very much.
Dennis	During that year I also found that I was going to [Victim's] room at night when I was visiting his place and we'd wrestle and, you know, which is again boundaries issues and all the rest of it.	I did know that it wasn't normal, it wasn't right.
Edward	And then I'm probably compulsed to get 'em to remove part of their clothes but I'm not attracted to go any further than that. I'm not attracted to touch them or anything.	Compulsive is probably the word. I'm wanting to treat 'em whether they wanted it or not.

Frank	I wanted to touch them … There was a pleasure, a physical sensation, pleasure out of touching them.	When I was attracted to do this and knew it was wrong, my discipline and self-control should've been "don't do it."
Grant	At times I was aroused and that's where it really got out of control.	At the back of my mind I just kept thinking "I shouldn't be doing it," but I was.
Howard	I wanted to touch the erect penis.	"I'm going to, I'm going to do this." And then the argument going on inside my head … "This is wrong. You shouldn't be doing it. It's not the right thing to be doing to the kid."

Table 3 presents excerpts from the transcripts which show that the eight participants knew that their behaviour transgressed their commitments as celibate Marist brothers and their personal values. The second column shows that at some stage in the interviews seven of the participants acknowledged that they knew that what they were doing was wrong at the time of the abuse. The exception was Edward, who did not believe at the time that providing massages for the young boys was morally wrong. He did recognise, however, that his behaviour was driven and compulsed, and that there was no need to require the boys to remove their underpants.

Shay, Litz and others report feelings of shame and guilt as a result of the morally injurious behaviour. Andrew spoke about his feelings of embarrassment when he ejaculated after his abuse of a child. Bernard was afraid of anyone discovering that he was homosexual, and was aware of the possible damage to his victim, asking, "Is he gonna have terrible problems for the rest of his life?" Dennis was afraid that other students would become aware of what he was doing, which suggests an awareness of feelings of guilt about his behaviour. Frank was also afraid of being caught: "I would've been frightened to have done it longer." Both Grant and Howard experienced internal conflict with regard to their abusive behaviour.

Betrayal by a System

Schorr et al. used grounded theory[32] to analyse the results of group conversations with veterans who spoke about the kinds of events that they regarded as morally

[32] Grounded theory, developed by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, is a qualitative research methodology that takes data as its starting point and builds categories through a

injurious. The results were categorised as (1) personal responsibility and (2) the responsibility of others. Within the second category, the veterans identified betrayal by the military system as one of the sources of moral injury. In their article, Schorr et al. wrote: "Common themes included the sentiment that the government engaged in a war that was unnecessary or unjust and/or society did not value the lives and sacrifice of its warriors and failed to support their mission materially and/or emotionally."[33] The experience of priests and brothers is not identical to people in the military, but there are priests and brothers who have felt that their lives and the personal sacrifices they made were not valued, that their efforts were taken for granted, with little experience of gratitude or acknowledgement, and that they were not given the professional formation necessary to undertake their responsibilities with confidence. They often felt ill-prepared and lacking in competence. Schorr et al. noted that betrayal by the system was the factor most frequently mentioned by the participants in their study. This echoes Marie Keenan's observation about the systemic neglect that contributed to the context in which the participants in her study abused children. I will now share the results from the research from Australia where similar factors emerged from the interviews with the eight participants.

Clerical Offenders as Victims of a System

Marie Keenan's research demonstrates the ways in which the Catholic Church in its formation and theology created a culture and system which did not help the clergy to develop healthily as human beings and how, in some ways, it created the conditions in which the abuse of children became a maladaptive way for some clergy to have their emotional and sexual needs met. The participants in the Australian research were also able to identify aspects of the Marist system which undermined their ability to live as healthy adults:

process of data reduction and conceptual organisation. In a sense, it is "atheoretical," but it can provide the foundation for new theories that are subsequently tested through further research. See Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1967).

[33] Yonit Schorr, Nathan R. Stein, Shira Maguen, J. Ben Barnes, Jeane Bosch, and Brett T. Litz, "Sources of Moral Injury among War Veterans: A Qualitative Evaluation," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 74, no. 12 (December 2018): 2213.

Table 4: Betrayed by the System

Participant	Betrayed by the system, including inadequate or damaging formation
Andrew	
Bernard	
Christopher	The working and living conditions were "horrendous."
Dennis	There was never any outreach to me. It was only that I was valuable because of what I could do … That contributed to an ongoing series of events that resulted in me abusing.
Edward	My psychologist said to me: "You were abused too in a different way. You've been abused by the system." It's the whole culmination of that journey of stress and being asked to fill gaps and stretching myself beyond, beyond, beyond where I could possibly manage.
Frank	In the novitiate we didn't really have what my psychologist later told me was normal sexual development … Looking back with my recent psychologist, I believe the Institute of Marist Brothers had some blame in me finishing up being an abuser … to take me from my home when I was 12, and people say: "Well, you went." Well, yes and no. How can a 12-year-old boy say you're not to go off?
Grant	And somewhere in her document she (psychologist) said that I was stunted, and I was still at the age of 13 … that I hadn't grown up.
Howard	I think the theories were there. But did we ever have a lecture where we sat down and talked about what it means to be gay or bisexual or heterosexual for that matter?

Theology and Spirituality

The participants identified some aspects of theology and spirituality that had an unhealthy influence on their lives as brothers: the Church's teaching on homosexuality, masturbation and mortal sin, perfectionism and the Marist work ethic, and the theology of obedience.

Homosexuality

Three of the participants (Bernard, Dennis and Howard) were homosexual adult men, and another (Grant) became aware of his attraction to adult men when he

was in prison as an elder man. The participants who were homosexual spoke about their feelings of shame about their orientation, and the fear of anyone discovering that they were homosexual. The participants grew up in the 1950s to the 1980s, at a time when the Catholic Church and some sections of society pathologized homosexual attraction and behaviour. Moore, in a careful analysis of the language used in Vatican documents about homosexuality, showed that the *Declaration on Sexual Ethics* (1975) described homosexual orientation as "incurable," and the result of an "innate instinct or a pathological constitution."[34] In his *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, Cardinal Ratzinger wrote about the homosexual "condition" and said that same-sex behaviour was to be regarded as an "intrinsic moral evil."[35] Moore, reflecting on this language and teaching, concluded that "it is not surprising that people in that condition sometimes end up frightened, miserable, and bitter, and that some even kill themselves … what they are suffering from is not homosexuality, but inhumanity."[36]

Masturbation and Mortal Sin

Along with this teaching on homosexuality, the participants in the study—especially Andrew, Dennis, Frank, Edward, and Grant, who were formed in the 1950s and 1960s, were affected by the fear of mortal sin and its association with masturbation. Dennis reflected that: "Even my own personal masturbation was, I knew, sinful, and I kept confessing it but … I persisted with the release. With the consolation." Edward remembered going to see the extraordinary confessor adding: "It was huge guilt." Frank spoke about: "The awful dichotomy of mortal sin." Bernard said: "There was one talk during the postulancy about masturbation, when it was referred to as 'sins of the hand' … Masturbation was a daily part of my life, I suppose." Howard remembered: "The Novice master said: 'If you're still masturbating at the age of 25 then there's something significantly wrong with you.' I thought: 'My God, really?' You know (laughs) … Yeah, they were the days."

These excerpts reflect Marie Keenan's critique of the teaching in moral theology and sexuality that influenced the participants in her study. The participants in Keenan's and the Australian study were deeply affected by this teaching but were trapped in a system which had little room for their humanity, and which led to feeling continually judged for ordinary human weakness.

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[34] Gareth Moore, "Are Homosexuals Sick?" *New Blackfriars* 70, no. 823 (January 1989): 15–19, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1989.tb04640.x.

[35] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1986), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html.

[36] Moore, "Are Homosexuals Sick?" 19.

Perfectionism

The spirituality of the 1950s and early 1960s encouraged priests and brothers to aspire to live perfect lives. This required abstinence from sex and a distrust of sexual desire, which was seen as sinful. Seminarians and young men in formation were trained to follow rules and to live lives of restraint and self-sacrifice. The bar was set impossibly high, and there was no room for failure or slackening. Those in formation were told that "there is never small matter (*parvitas materiae)* in the area of sexuality." Allied to this perfectionism was a strong Marist work ethic, going back to the founder, St Marcellin Champagnat's love of work.

> Dennis: "I yearned for a close relationship with Dad but nothing I did was ever good enough …I still fit in my prayers, fit in the office, kept at it … I'm still … I'm always going to be one for whom near enough is never good enough … Trying to be as good as I could at sport and be as holy as I could … However, there was all this anxiety about "was I good enough to be a brother?"
> Edward: "I never ever set out to be unpopular, but I set out to be efficient … I mean I was efficient, but I had to become more efficient."
> Howard: "If I could be the best principal, if I could be the best schoolteacher, if I could be the best president that the Principals' Association ever had, then I would get recognition and it would make all that other stuff that I know about that people don't know about go away."

"Was I good enough to be a brother?" The theology of the time meant that no one was ever good enough. Everyone failed in the attempt to be perfect, adding rigorous self-examination and feelings of failure to lives which were often stressful. As Marie Keenan noted, these were often good men trying the best they could—but it was never good enough.

Obedience

The theology of the vow of obedience changed significantly after Vatican II. Prior to that date, it was often understood in a militaristic way, and the vow of obedience was often compared to military obedience in retreat talks. The word obedience comes from the Latin verb "*audire*," which means "to listen," but the experience of many people in religious life and priesthood was that they were simply not listened to and that perfect obedience—without question—was seen as a virtue. Diarmuid O'Murchu MSC wrote that obedience has left scars and said that in the name of this vow many religious have been "hurt, abused and victimised."

Alejandro Labajos SJ described it as the "principal knot of spiritual abuse."[37] These comments by the participants show the influence of the theology of obedience on their lives:

> Andrew: "You'd do what you were told. Obedience was everything."
> Dennis: "He said: 'Your job is when I put you down … to get up and I'll keep putting you down and seeing if you get up. If you don't get up then you're not suitable to be a Marist brother.' So I said: 'Okay.'"
> Edward: "It became clear to me that … one of the biggest growth experiences for me was in 1976 at (a renewal programme) when I said: 'No.'"
> Grant: Question: "What kept you in leadership positions?"
> Response: "Well, a brother who's obedient."

"Obedience was everything." The culture of Marist life elevated obedience as a principle of life. Grant, who did not like being a school principal, and who reflected that his abuse was partly as a compensation for the stress he experienced as a result of his responsibilities, obeyed because that was what was required of him. Edward felt that he began to grow up in his forties when he found the courage to say no to something that he was asked to do, and Dennis was told quite clearly that he had to keep accepting being put down by his superior as some kind of twisted test of obedience and his Marist vocation. His desire for acceptance (similar to his desire for acknowledgment and acceptance by his father) led him to accept this belittling and oppressive treatment from his formation master.

Marist Round Table

In 2017, as part of their response to the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Abuse, which made public the number of Marist brothers against whom there had been allegations of abuse, the Marist leadership organised a round table with the participation of a criminologist, a psychiatrist, a sociologist, Marist

[37] Spiritual abuse is a term which is now becoming widely used to identify abuse which takes place in a religious or spiritual context. Sr. Katharina Kluitman OSF as part of a webinar that took place on April 28, 2021, said that spiritual abuse is an "umbrella" term covering emotional and power abuse in the context of religious life, including accompaniment, spiritual direction and in communities. It is similar to emotional and psychological abuse, and the concept of "coercive control." It can be considered as spiritual abuse when the abuse takes place in a faith, religious or spiritual context, especially where those who are affected are in a dependent or obedience-based relationship with someone who is in a position of power and authority over them. There is growing awareness of spiritual abuse in the experience of religious sisters and in formation houses.

brothers, and victims of abuse by Marist brothers. The participants identified a range of factors that they believed contributed to the abuse of children by Marist brothers, some of which have already been identified above:

- The practice of obedience.
- Lack of preparation for teaching and other responsibilities.
- Limited experience of and constrained sexuality.
- Often dealing with classes of 60 or more children.
- The expectation to be a good disciplinarian.
- The juniorate system which led some men to become highly compliant and immature (some boys, including Andrew, who was one of the participants, were victims of abuse in juniorates).
- The Irish religious culture of control, fear of damnation and hell, which influenced the Australian Church and the Marist Brothers.
- Leaving religious life was seen as personal failure and shameful.

Moral injury involves a betrayal of trust. It can be argued that the boys who attended the juniorate, and the young men who left home at 18 with the dream of being accepted as a Marist brother, did not all receive the care, formation and support necessary to live the life they were being asked to join. In a sense, the Marist Brothers failed in their duty of care to these boys and young men and their parents. As well as experiences that were sometimes abusive, there was neglect of the human, spiritual, and sometimes the professional training that was necessary to live the requirements of religious life. The young men were often infantilized in the process of religious formation, and some were not given opportunities to make choices with money and personal freedom that would enable them to have the normal growing experiences which facilitate people to learn lessons necessary to live adult lives. Brother Philip Pinto CFC, former Congregational Leader of the Edmund Rice Christian Brothers, commenting on the culture of his own order, said to a gathering of Marist leaders in France in September 2013 that in the past, "members were often treated with disregard."

If we return to the definition of moral injury offered at the beginning of this chapter, the participants in this study—and many other Marist brothers—were part of a system where they were not properly trained for the life they were being asked to lead and often lacked the professional training for responsibilities they were given. The theology of obedience left little room for personal choice or listening to their own wisdom, and the teaching on obedience, perfectionism and the value of work, left insufficient room for rest, and the needs and vulnerabilities that are part of being human. These men were often failed by leadership, and they experienced stress, uncertainty, exhaustion, internal conflict and confusion as they tried to live this life. The Catholic teaching on sexuality and mortal sin created a culture of fear and self-examination. The men who were homosexual lived

with a deep sense of shame and a fear that their confrères, family members, students or colleagues might discover their orientation with fear of the possible judgment and disapproval that would come with such a revelation.

Mescher wrote about victims "being abused by an entire belief system."[38] The same is true of the participants in this study, who tried to be faithful to an institution that, in some ways, did them harm. Returning to Mescher, these were high-stakes situations, as these men lived somewhat stunted lives where they had to keep parts of their lives secret. Each of these men exercised personal agency when they abused, but the abuse happened in a context which was itself sometimes abusive—with a lack of regard for their human needs, and little room to deal with ordinary human needs for affection, intimacy, rest, and friendship.

On the Other Hand . . .

Before concluding this reflection, it is important to note a significant difference between clerical offenders and other perpetrators of moral injury. Jamieson et al. note that: "Fundamentally, the military's core business is combat." Military personnel experience moral injury in the course of carrying out tasks for which they were trained or in circumstances where they felt betrayed by leaders who did not honour their part of the military's psychological contract to provide good leadership in high-stakes situations. The same is true of veterinary surgeons, medical personnel and first responders, who can experience moral injury due to the conflicts and systemic failings of the situations where they find themselves.

The core business of the Catholic Church is care of others in the light of the values of Jesus Christ. The Marist Brothers were founded to provide education and spiritual formation to children. The Marist Constitutions in the past had clear rules about the behaviour of brothers and their relations with pupils. While the word "boundaries" was not used, the Common Rule of 1960 explicitly disapproved of and forbade inappropriate relationships with pupils. The Common Rules made it clear that brothers should not be in a room alone with a student, and that they should avoid becoming too close to individual students.

Frank wanted an apology for the way that he felt that he had been abused by the Marist formation system. One provincial put his arm around him and said, "I'm sorry," which was a very healing moment for Frank. When he asked the next provincial, the reply he got was: "Well, everyone who went away at twelve didn't abuse." Frank's comment was: "Stupid me." Blaming the system can only take you so far, as there were many other Marist brothers who were formed in the same system who did not abuse. The training these men received—however imperfect—was not designed to lead to the abuse of children. Invoking moral injury does not excuse sexual abuse.

[38] Mescher, "Clergy Sexual Abuse as Moral Injury," 88.

Moral Injury of the Perpetrators

Jonathan Shay identified moral injury as a betrayal of what is right. The Marist brothers and priests who abused children undoubtedly betrayed what was right. Reflecting on their experience, all eight participants in the Australian study acknowledged that they knew that what they were doing was wrong, and they expressed sorrow for their behaviour and offered apologies to their victims. Andrew said that "When it happened, I felt absolutely ashamed." Frank said he was "terribly ashamed and remorseful." Howard said that he "was deeply ashamed about what was happening," and that his abusive behaviour "continues to haunt me day after day." All of the participants pleaded guilty in court and acknowledged what they had done. Christopher momentarily thought of ending his life while driving a car, and all the participants experienced significant losses of their good name, ministry, and damage to family and professional relationships as a result of the abuse. Their behaviour has led to a re-evaluation of their lives, and they carry their behaviour and its impact on their lives with them.

Conclusion

Returning to the starting point of this chapter, it would appear that moral injury can, as Marcus Mescher proposed, encompass both perpetrators and victims. Some perpetrators of clerical abuse were themselves victims of a morally injurious religious system, in its structures of authority, theology, spirituality, and formation. However, being a victim of a morally injurious system does not excuse abuse. The experience of abuse also led to feelings of anguish, guilt, remorse and shame for the participants—in varying degrees. Their moral injury is not the same as pathology: it is an existential and spiritual wound brought about by their choices, in circumstances where they themselves were wounded and weak.

The Marist and ecclesial system contained features that undermined the well-being of many members of the order. Some aspects of Marist formation promoted unhealthy attitudes and behaviours, especially in the area of sexuality. Obedience, perfectionism, poor formation in morality and sexuality, created impossible expectations where vulnerability and human weakness were seen as failure. Some priests and brothers also felt infantilized by a system where there was often neglect of their basic human and professional needs. None of the participants knew of anyone who had been dismissed for abuse, giving the impression that no harm would come to them as a result of their actions. Moral injury offers an important key to understanding the experience of victims of clerical abuse, but it can also offer insights into the experience of those who abused, as people who were themselves victims, and who, as a result of their abuse, carry wounds into their lives after discovery, imprisonment and rehabilitative therapy.

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PART IV. THEOLOGY, SOCIETY, ETHICS, AND THE PUBLIC SQUARE

BETWEEN DIVISION AND DIALOGUE:

REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF THEOLOGY IN OVERCOMING POPULISM AND POLARISATION

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Abstract

The issue of populism is an increasing concern in several European countries, including Slovakia. Populist leaders often use divisions in society to achieve their own political and personal interests. This creates an even more polarised environment characterised by the formation of isolated groups that are in opposition to one another. Within the Church, there is also a problem of clericalism, which can similarly lead to divisions among the faithful. This chapter reflects on some potential contributions of theology in addressing these challenges. The Second Vatican Council emphasised that authority must be practised as a way of serving others, portraying the Church as an inverted pyramid where the highest authority is the lowest servant of all. The concept of synodality, which is rooted in the ecclesiology of the Council, aims to create structures where the voices of all the faithful are heard and valued. The sense for the faith enables all of the faithful to engage in meaningful dialogue, grounded in mutual listening. Faith is not a property of the individual; it can be lived only within the community of the Church. Theological reflection must, therefore, be concerned with the challenge of overcoming isolation and polarisation, finding the truth together as one community led by the Holy Spirit.

Keywords: Populism; polarisation; synodality; dialogue; theology; religion and politics; clericalism; *sensus fidei*.

Introduction

Rising support for populist leaders has emerged as one of the most concerning political trends not only in Europe, but across the globe, sparking intense debates in both public and academic spheres. In recent years, populist parties have won seats in government in numerous countries. One of the most evident consequences is the growth of polarisation of society, as populist rhetoric often frames political opponents as existential threats to the nation.[1] The most widely accepted definition of populism is that it "considers society to be ultimately separated into two… groups," which are "the people" on one side and "the elite" on the other.[2] Populist movements frequently forge alliances with religious groups and leaders to legitimise their agendas and rally support. This relationship poses a threat for religion, as it often risks politicising faith and undermining trust in religious institutions.[3]

This chapter will explore the problem of populism, its polarising dynamics, and its relationships to religion. It will outline the possible role of theology in striving to overcome populist tendencies, and it will present synodality as a prophetic sign which can inspire the world in fostering dialogue and building up unity.

Defining Populism

Among scholars, there is a continuing discussion about the essence of populism. It is not easy to arrive at a definition of populism because it can exist in various forms and styles. It can be found on both the political left and right, adapting its rhetoric to different contexts. Populism thus appears as a flexible phenomenon.

In public debate, populism is understood mostly in two ways: as highly emotional, simplistic discourse appealing to popular sentiments, or as opportunistic policies aimed at quickly pleasing voters and "buying" their support.[4] While both notions carry some intuitive truth, they do not provide a solid ground for academic debate. Within scholarly discourse, one of the most popular definitions was formulated by Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde: "An ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups,

[1] Braeden Davis, Jay Goodliffe, and Kirk Hawkins, "The Two-Way Effects of Populism on Affective Polarization," *Comparative Political Studies* 58, no. 1 (January 2025): 123, https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140241237453.

[2] Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 543, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x.

[3] Pavol Bargár, "Threats to Democracy: A Theological Response," *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 42, no. 1 (January 2025): 4, https://doi.org/10.1177/02653788241271824.

[4] Mudde, "Populist Zeitgeist," 542–3.

'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people."[5]

In current academic discussion, however, many scholars argue that populism should not be considered an ideology because it does not, by itself, offer complex answers to political questions or provide a specific worldview, as, for example, conservatism or liberalism do.[6] Populism is now more commonly seen as "a communication phenomenon,"[7] "a political strategy,"[8] or "a discursive frame."[9] These recent approaches are more able to grasp the flexible essence of populism, which can take many different shapes and adapt to various environments.

In reality, populism almost always appears attached to some other ideology, sometimes even assimilated into it.[10] It can also be attached to religion or ideas drawn from a religious context. In the next section of this chapter, we examine this relationship of populism to religion. At first, we outline some key characteristics of populism:

a) Anti-pluralist and polarising

Division stands at the very core of populism. In its Manichean worldview, it depicts social and political life as a battle between the pure people and the corrupt elite.[11] This perspective fuels a persistent "us" versus "them" rhetoric that sharply divides society and denies the legitimacy of opposing groups. Within this framework, compromise is often rejected, as any concession is seen as contaminating the purity of "the people."[12] Polarisation is, therefore, an essential aspect of populism, as it constructs a division within society, wherein "the people" are regarded as the unique bearers of a set of values, while groups of "others" are inevitably seen as a threat not only to the people but to the very values for which they stand.[13]

[5] Mudde, "Populist Zeitgeist," 543; Bart Bonikowski, "Three Lessons of Contemporary Populism in Europe and the United States," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 23, no. 1 (2016): 10.

[6] Bonikowski, "Lessons of Contemporary Populism," 12; Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

[7] Claes H. De Vreese, Frank Esser, Toril Aalberg, Carsten Reinemann, and James Stanyer, "Populism as an Expression of Political Communication Content and Style: A New Perspective," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 23, no. 4 (October 2018): 426, https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161218790035.

[8] Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 4.

[9] Bonikowski, "Lessons of Contemporary Populism," 14.

[10] Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 6.

[11] Mudde, "Populist Zeitgeist," 544.

[12] Mudde, "Populist Zeitgeist," 544.

[13] Davis, Goodliffe, and Hawkins, "Two-Way Effects of Populism," 127; Kenneth M. Roberts, "Populism and Polarization in Comparative Perspective: Constitutive, Spatial and Institutional Dimensions," *Government and Opposition* 57, no. 4 (October 2022): 682, https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.14.

This leads to treating political opponents as unworthy of democratic respect and, consequently, often provokes the other side to emotionally driven defence, viewing populists as enemies and outsiders within the political community. This dynamic can deepen a spiral of conflict, intensifying division within society.[14]

b) Simplistic and emotional rhetoric

Populism is also characterised by its simplistic answers to complex problems.[15] As Harald Bergsdorf says, "populists aim to crush the Gordian knots of modern politics with the sword of alleged simple solutions."[16] This simplified discourse reduces complex social problems to black-and-white issues, rendering more nuanced coverage less appealing than populist messages that speak directly to ordinary people in familiar language. Such communication deliberately bypasses complex policy discussions in favour of emotionally resonant appeals that promise clear answers. This style of politics leads to the promotion of ill-founded policies that attract public sentiment regardless of their actual efficacy. Application of these policies in reality often causes inflation or economic decline.[17]

c) Centred around a charismatic leader

The populist leader capitalises on public resentment by giving it voice, articulating people's understanding of the situation, and identifying "the elites" as the cause of the problem. This positions the leader as the authentic representative of the *vox populi*.[18] Populists typically show their unrestrained manners to signal their closeness to the people, in contrast with the well-mannered elite. They simultaneously signal their strength and extraordinariness to demonstrate that they deserve to lead and represent the people.[19] Populist leaders present the acquisition of political power as the solution to the identified problems of the people.[20] They often argue that other political parties prioritise their own interests over those of the people, while populists portray themselves as those speaking on behalf of the oppressed.[21] However, once populists assume power, they often eventually pursue their own interests rather than those of their voters.

[14] Davis, Goodliffe, and Hawkins, "The Two-Way Effects of Populism," 128.
[15] Nils Karlson, *Reviving Classical Liberalism Against Populism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 8.
[16] Harald Bergsdorf, "Rhetorik des Populismus am Beispiel rechtsextremer und rechtspopulistischer Parteien wie der 'Republikaner,' der FPÖ und des 'Front National,'" *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen* 31, no. 3 (2000): 624.
[17] Bonikowski, "Lessons of Contemporary Populism," 11.
[18] James F. Keenan, "Restoring Social Trust: From Populism to Synodality," *Theological Studies* 84, no. 1 (March 2023): 121, https://doi.org/10.1177/00405639221150757.
[19] Karlson, *Classical Liberalism*, 11.
[20] Bonikowski, "Lessons of Contemporary Populism," 11.
[21] Mudde, "Populist Zeitgeist," 546.

Populism and Religion

We can observe that populism is often connected in some way to religion. To better understand these dynamics, we will first outline an idea emphasised by many scholars, namely, that the category of "the people" of the populist rhetoric is neither a real nor all-inclusive category. In fact, scholars often describe it as "an imagined community," "a mythical and constructed subset of the whole population."[22] Ernesto Laclau, one of the most prominent political theorists of populism, argued that both categories used by populists—"the people" and "the elites"—are in fact vast conceptual containers that can be filled with a wide range of ideological content.[23] These categories are deliberately constructed, often by appealing to basic human needs for belonging, recognition, and respect. Populists construct a collective identity for the people through narratives about an important set of values which they share and which they need to defend against "the others" who do not share them or even oppose them. It offers people a sense of purpose and meaning, giving them a cause for the common good that is higher than just individual interests. Thus, populists actively construct a collective identity for the people—one that has the power to transform diverse individuals into a unified political subject.[24]

In this process of constructing the identity of the people, populists often invoke established categories such as ethnicity, nation, ideology, and religion. Accordingly, religion can become instrumentalised by populists to mark boundaries between "us" and "the others," and for providing their supporters a sense of meaning in politically defending some values. In Europe's current political landscape, Christianity is often used as a symbol of cultural unity rather than a transcendent faith. References to Christian heritage or "Judeo-Christian values" are used to distinguish "civilised" Western society from "barbaric" immigrants, or to set conservatives against liberals. By marking these boundaries, populists portray "the others" not only as a threat to the people, but to the very values for which they stand. Moreover, leaders can present themselves as guardians of a threatened moral order. They use religious symbols as political cues for exclusion and national renewal. Within such dynamics, Christianity serves as a powerful boundary-making device that broadens electoral appeal.[25]

Some researchers argue that populism does not merely use religion for its own purposes; it also imitates religion in certain aspects.[26] In their Manichean division

[22] Mudde, "Populist Zeitgeist," 546.

[23] Ernesto Laclau, "Towards a Theory of Populism," in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Thought: Capitalism,*
Fascism, Populism (London: New Left Books, 1977), 172–73.

[24] Karlson, *Classical Liberalism Against Populism*, 60–61.

[25] Jeffrey Haynes, "Right-Wing Populism and Religion in Europe and the USA," *Religions* 11, no. 10 (September 2020): 490, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11100490.

[26] See for example, Ihsan Yilmaz, Nicholas Morieson, and Mustafa Demir, "Exploring Religions in Relation to Populism: A Tour around the World," *Religions* 12, no. 5 (April

of reality, populists amplify the fundamental moral division between good and evil, creating boundaries between the pure and corrupt, sacred and profane. The category of "the people," which stands at the core of populism, carries within itself an aura of sacredness. It is elevated to an absolute, sacred status, together with hallowed cultural symbols.[27]

The "sacred" dimension of populism, as Daniel Nilsson DeHanas states, "largely builds on an idealised past of the people: their glory days or heartland that has faded with time. The past is viewed with nostalgia for what was lost, and resentment towards those who are seen as either unfairly privileged or culpable for that loss."[28] Far from a real history, this past is a mythic narrative laden with emotions of nostalgia.[29] Populist leaders position themselves as something like saviours of the people, invoking a notion of a "battle" against the enemies of the people, the result of which would be a restoration of their dignity and glory.[30] Populism, therefore, has a redemptive character, promising salvation for the people through the recovery of a lost paradise.[31]

Forming a Theological Response: Synodality as a Prophetic Sign

Much of the theological reflection on populism seems to be focused on criticising its instrumentalisation of Christianity for political purposes, and this critique is indeed valid and necessary. However, as James F. Keenan remarks, if we focus solely on criticism, we risk overlooking the legitimate laments and deprivation of the people.[32] Many scholars point out that while populism can be toxic by capitalising on public resentment, it is often able to identify problems of the people and to give voice to those who are often silent.[33]

Therefore, the best response appears to be to foster an authentic dialogue in which all have a voice, and everyone has something to learn. Such dialogue is precisely what is promoted in synodality. The *Final Document* of the Synod on Synodality states that "the synodal style enables the Church to be a prophetic

2021), https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12050301; Daniel Nilsson DeHanas, "The Spirit of Populism: Sacred, Charismatic, Redemptive, and Apocalyptic Dimensions," *Democratization* 31, no. 4 (June 2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2284277.

[27] DeHanas, "The Spirit of Populism," 836.

[28] DeHanas, "The Spirit of Populism," 843.

[29] DeHanas, "The Spirit of Populism," 834.

[30] Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell, and Olivier Roy, eds., *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion* (London: Hurst, 2016), 2.

[31] DeHanas, "The Spirit of Populism," 838, 844.

[32] Keenan, "Restoring Social Trust," 125.

[33] Bonikowski, "Lessons of Contemporary Populism," 23; Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, 83; Keenan, "Restoring Social Trust," 125.

voice in today's world,"[34] and we can see the veracity of these words also in the face of populism. Synodality aims to create structures and relationships in which the voices of all are heard and valued. During the synodal process of consultation, we have seen the joy of many faithful who were recognised and felt they had something to say to the whole Church. This powerfully addresses the human need to be welcomed in a particular community.[35]

Synodality is a way of building up and living communion, something that is more than populist collectivism. Pope Francis expressed the idea that "Synodality without communion can become ecclesiastical populism."[36] In this communion, unity is not built up by division or marking boundaries, but by harmoniously integrating various cultures, vocations and charisms. It is a vivid community in which everyone is welcomed and has a place. Synodality thus emerges as a prophetic sign for a world marked by rising populism and polarisation, offering a model of authentic dialogue that transcends mere political strategizing. While populism exploits anger and creates false dichotomies between "the people" and "the elites," synodality demonstrates how genuine listening and mutual respect can foster unity while appreciating the value of diversity. Synodality also aims to foster the understanding of leadership as a service to the community in which the people are authentically valued and listened to, not merely instrumentalised for the political agenda of the leader.

Conclusion

This chapter seeks to respond to the need to engage theology with contemporary societal problems. It presents the dynamics of populism, at the heart of which lie division and opposition. Religion can be manipulated by populist leaders as a tool for drawing boundaries and positioning others as enemies. Theology, however, is called to respond not merely by critique, but by creating spaces of authentic dialogue rooted in mutual listening. Synodality can become a prophetic sign for the world and contemporary politics. Many questions, however, remain open for further dialogue. In which ways can we extend the mutual listening and dialogue modelled by synodality beyond ecclesial communities to wider society? How can we safeguard religion from its misuse for the division of society? And, following the words of Pope Francis, how can we foster synodal communion in our local churches to overcome ecclesial populism and clericalism? The Church is called

[34] XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Document. For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), no. 47, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf.

[35] XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Document*, no. 48.

[36] Francis, "Videomessaggio del Santo Padre Francesco in occasione della plenaria della Pontificia Commissione per l'America Latina," May 27, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/messages/pont-messages/2022/documents/20220526-videomessaggio-plenaria-pcal.html.

to deepen its synodal way of living and, in doing so, become a prophetic witness of authentic dialogue to a polarised world.

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TRANS-CONFESSIONAL THEOLOGY INSTEAD OF CONFESSIONAL THEOLOGY?:

THE CREDIBILITY OF THEOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF SECULARIZATION

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Abstract

This chapter examines the credibility of academic theology under the conditions of contemporary secularization and argues that theology must move beyond confessional narrowness toward a trans-confessional paradigm without abandoning its ecclesial foundations. Beginning with current debates about the place of theology at public universities and Wolfhart Pannenberg's thesis that the division of Christianity contributed to secularization, the study identifies the principal limitations of confessional theology: its one-sidedness, dependence on inherited polemical language, and tendency to reproduce historical divisions. It then develops a constructive vision of theology centred on the triune God, the hierarchy of truths, the existential relevance of Christian revelation, and a shared search for truth across confessional boundaries. Particular attention is given to the ecclesiality and relative autonomy of theology. As an element of the interpretive tradition of revelation, theology bears a critical and prophetic responsibility within the Church, including the purification and renewed articulation of doctrinal language. The chapter concludes that trans-confessional theology should be understood not as theology detached from the Church, but as an anticipatory service to Christian unity and to the Church's mission in a secular society.

Keywords: Academic theology; trans-confessional theology; secularization; ecclesiality of theology; ecumenism; hierarchy of truths.

Introduction

For centuries, theology operated within societies that were, at least nominally, Christian. Its authority was rarely contested, since it was embedded in a religiously shaped cultural consensus. The process of secularization, however, has placed theology in an increasingly defensive position. In this new context, theology is compelled to justify its credibility not only within the academy, but also in the wider public sphere. Academic theology is frequently criticized today as hermetic, excessively system-bound, too closely tied to ecclesial structures and dogmatic commitments, detached from real existential concerns, anachronistic, or even ideological.

I therefore propose the following thesis: if theology—understood here primarily as academic theology—is to remain a living and credible bridge between faith and modernity, it must move beyond confessional narrowness, become a site of shared truth-seeking, and offer a coherent, that is, ecumenical interpretation of human existential experience, while relinquishing rigid confessional qualifiers. Yet this immediately raises a fundamental question: is such a theology possible at all? Since revelation is received in and through the Church, and within the Church it was committed to writing, theology without the Church would seem to be deprived of its primary source.

This chapter seeks to address precisely that question. It begins by examining a number of premises that call into question the credibility and social resonance of theology defined in strictly confessional terms. It then considers the limitations of a theology constrained by a "confessional corset," especially its one-sidedness, its entanglement in historical divisions, and its difficulty in articulating a form of faith that is universally communicable. On that basis, the chapter argues for the possibility and necessity of a Christian theology of a non-confessional or transconfessional character—one that, without forfeiting its ecclesial rootedness, could function in a more dialogical, existentially relevant, and ecumenically open way. In the end, this reflection leads to a reconsideration of what the ecclesiality of theology might mean, and whether such a theology may in fact constitute one of the most promising ways of recovering theological credibility under the conditions of secular modernity.

Point of Departure: Grounds for Questioning Theology in a Confessional Corset

The Controversy Over Theology's Place at the University

In 2023, Marek Migalski, a well-known Polish political scientist and professor at the University of Silesia, addressed a letter to the university rector demanding that theology be removed from the university. One of his arguments was the claim that "virtually every subject taught at the Faculty of Theology is straightforward

Catholic indoctrination or teaching aligned with the Vatican's view of the world. (…) The continuation of this state of affairs offends the most elementary sense of decency and any serious understanding of what a university in the twenty-first century should be."[1]

The rector, Professor Ryszard Koziołek, replied by defending theology's place at the university. At the same time, however, he expressed the hope that theologians themselves would initiate a serious debate "on the future of academic theology at the university, including, among other things, its expansion to include theologies of other Christian traditions."[2]

This remark is significant. The rector, who clearly recognizes the legitimacy of theology at a public university and its contribution to the humanities, also gives voice to a broader contemporary expectation: theology should not remain enclosed within a confessional enclave.

Divided Christianity as a "Catalyst" of Secularization

Contemporary secularization manifests its destructive force in many areas, including in considerations of the place of theology within the academy and its ability to shape public life. Many years ago, Wolfhart Pannenberg argued that secularization, insofar as it has taken the form of estrangement from Christianity, is not simply an external fate imposed upon the churches. Rather, it is in large measure the consequence of their own sins against unity: the divisions of the sixteenth century and the subsequent wars of religion left those living in confessionally fragmented territories, who desired peaceful coexistence, with little alternative but to seek a basis for common life outside the sphere of confessional conflict and contradiction.[3]

If, then, the division of Christianity contributed to secularization and to a kind of "privatization of Christianity"[4]—that is, the loss of its former public role—then the restoration of Christianity's social relevance must proceed through the overcoming of division and the recovery of Christian unity. For Pannenberg, only

[1] "List otwarty prof. Marka Migalskiego do Rektora UŚ oraz odpowiedź Rektora w sprawie postulatu likwidacji Wydziału Teologicznego," *Gazeta Uniwersytecka UŚ* no. 10 (310) (July–September 2023), https://gazeta.us.edu.pl/node/433603.

[2] "Odpowiedź rektora Uniwersytetu Śląskiego Ryszarda Koziołka na List otwarty prof. Marka Migalskiego, w którym postuluje likwidację Wydziału Teologicznego w Uniwersytecie Śląskim," *Gazeta Uniwersytecka UŚ* no. 10 (310) (July–September 2023), https://gazeta.us.edu.pl/node/433603.

[3] Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Einheit der Kirche als Glaubenswirklichkeit und als ökumenisches Ziel," in *Ethik und Ekklesiologie. Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 201; Kurt Koch, "Ökumenische Herausforderungen in heutigen säkularen Gesellschaften," in *Ökumene in säkularer Gesellschaft*, eds. Wolfgang W. Müller and Franc Wagner (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2022), 177–78.

[4] See Johann Baptist Metz, *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft. Studien zu einer praktischen Fundamentaltheologie* (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald Verlag, 1977), 31.

the overcoming of Christian division can make Christianity capable once again of presenting religious truth credibly within the secular context of modern society.[5]

This insight suggests that the churches will be able to contribute credibly and effectively to the preservation, support, and renewal of society only when they are reconciled and undergo the necessary process of historical purification. Under such conditions, theology too may recover a new public significance. Yet an unavoidable question arises: must theology simply wait for ecclesial reconciliation? Is such a prospect not too remote? Might theology not already anticipate that unity and thereby exercise a genuinely prophetic function vis-à-vis the churches?

It would seem that theology neither must nor can wait passively for ecclesial reconciliation. Rather, in its own self-understanding, it could seek to suspend its confessional fragmentation and propose a non-confessional paradigm—or, to borrow Rector Koziołek's phrase, to step out of its confessional ghetto. This, of course, raises further questions: is a genuinely non-confessional theology possible? Can theology emancipate itself from the Church? Would such a move not reduce it to the level of religious studies? These are the questions that the following reflections seek to address.

The Need to Renew Theology: *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*

Although in a different context from the one considered here, Pope Francis likewise speaks of the urgent need for theological renewal in his apostolic letter *Ad theologiam promovendam*. The document contains a number of striking formulations emphasizing that such renewal cannot be merely cosmetic; it must touch the very foundations of theology. Already in the opening paragraph, Francis states that "the practice of theology capable of responding to the demands of the present time cannot be limited to the abstract repetition of formulas and schemes from the past. Called to offer a prophetic interpretation of the present and to discern, in the light of Revelation, new paths for the future, theology must confront profound cultural transformations, mindful that 'we are living not merely in an age of change, but in a change of age.'"[6] The strongest formulation appears in no. 4, where Francis states that theological reflection is "called to make a breakthrough, to undergo a paradigm shift, a 'courageous cultural revolution.'"

Francis deliberately employs strong language. His intention can hardly be reduced to a call for modest reforms within the existing model of theology. What he is demanding is not simply an internal adjustment, but a rethinking of theology

[5] Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Die zukünftige Rolle von 'Glaube und Kirchenverfassung' in einer säkularisierten Welt," in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Beiträge zur Systematischen Theologie. Vol. 3: Kirche und Ökumene* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 234.

[6] Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), no. 1, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html.

at the level of its governing paradigm. At the same time, the letter contains statements that indirectly support the idea of a theology that transcends confessional limitations. In the same paragraph, theology is described as a "space" and a "place" of encounter. Moreover, Francis envisions theology as sapiential rather than abstract, not ideological but "mercifully attentive to the open wounds of humanity and creation,"[7] and cultivated within human history as a bearer of hope.

Read in this light, *Ad theologiam promovendam* plausibly suggests that a renewed theology may well take on a supra-confessional form—though not, therefore, a non-ecclesial one. According to the conciliar vision of the Church, a legitimate plurality of churches exists, each embodying, though to differing degrees, the one Church of Christ.

Theology Practised Across Confessional Boundaries

The claim that the persistence of confessional divisions in theology is, at times, somewhat artificial is borne out by experience. At the Faculty of Theology of the University of Opole, where I teach, three pastors from non-Catholic churches have completed doctorates in theology in recent years: two from the Lutheran Church and one from the Pentecostal Church. It is worth noting that both Lutheran graduates later became bishops in their own church. Their decision to study and earn a doctorate in a confessionally "other" theological setting presented no obstacle whatsoever. Equally important is the fact that all three completed the full standard curriculum; the faculty introduced no special adjustments or exemptions.

One might object that these are exceptional cases that merely confirm the rule that theology is ordinarily practised within confessional boundaries. Yet on a broader European—and indeed wider—scale, such examples are by no means unique. Even if in Poland they remain relatively uncommon, they nonetheless demonstrate that such a model is possible. The step from possibility to wider practice is therefore not inconceivable.

The "Weakness" of Confessional Theology: One-Sidedness, Relativity, and Captivity to Historical Division

Confessional theology is, in large part, a product of ecclesial division. If one considers the Reformation and its aftermath, it becomes clear that over time specifically confessional emphases emerged that had previously existed as differing possibilities within a single *christianitas*. Many of the characteristic features of particular churches and their theologies developed in explicit contrast to another church or ecclesial community—for example, in relation to the theology of the

[7] Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam*, no. 7.

episcopal office or the sacramentality of episcopal ordination. Through the process of confessionalization, such distinctives increasingly became encoded in language, which in turn furnished the structure of later theological systems.[8] This dynamic, visible across the differentiating churches, is sometimes described as "contrast enhancement" (*Kontrastverstärkung*)[9] or "narcissism of minor differences" (*Narzissmus der kleinen Differenzen*).[10]

The language of theology is inseparable from the language of faith. Like any language, the language of faith generates a particular picture of the world. Yet it is also especially susceptible to decay, eventually becoming little more than religious chatter. This occurs when religious slogans are repeated after they have lost any living relationship to the worldview that actually shapes people's experience. Religious language is particularly vulnerable in this regard, because it is the language of tradition, and therefore always also the language of history.[11]

This dynamic can also be observed in the language of confessional theologies. The object of theology, linguistically speaking, is identical with that of the language of faith: God, the world, history and salvation, the human person, faith and unbelief—precisely as these are articulated within the grammar of faith itself. Theology is therefore deeply dependent on the language of faith, though it is not reducible to it. Theology asks questions that arise from faith and seeks to answer them. It remains dependent on the language of faith (*Sprache des Glaubens*) and the confessional language (*Bekenntnissprache*), even though it is itself a scholarly discourse. Its task is not confession or testimony as such, but the articulation of the *ratio fidei*, the intelligibility and credibility of faith.[12]

Even though theology "objectifies" the content of faith and speaks about the realities of faith (*Sachverhalte des Glaubens*), it remains a historical phenomenon. It changes shape in accordance with historical circumstances. Under conditions of confessional pluralization, theology too took on a confessional form and came to present the matters of faith from the vantage point of particular confessional perspectives. Because theological language remains dependent on the language of faith, confessional theologies often become prisoners of the historical divisions that this language carries within itself. In this way, they continue to communicate and reactivate those divisions in the present. If language shapes a

[8] Peter Walter, "Die Veränderung der katholischen Kirche durch die Reformation," in *Wem gehört die Reformation? Nationale und konfessionelle Dispositionen der Reformationsdeutung*, eds. Günter Frank, Volker Leppin, and Herman J. Selderhuis (Freiburg, Basel, and Wien: Herder, 2013), 115–20; Peter Hünermann, *Sprache des Glaubens—Sprache des Lehramtes—Sprache der Theologie. Eine geschichtliche Orientierung* (Freiburg, Basel, and Wien: Herder, 2016), 100; Peter Hünermann, "Kriterien für die Rezeption des II. Vatikanischen Konzils," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 191 (2011): 135–39.

[9] Walter, "Die Veränderung," 119.

[10] Quoted from Walter, "Die Veränderung," 119.

[11] See Hünermann, *Sprache des Glaubens*, 67.

[12] Hünermann, *Sprache des Glaubens*, 74–75.

world, then theological language anchored in confessional division continually reproduces and transmits a world structured by confessional conflict.

If, however, theology as a scholarly discipline is not itself an act of confession but discourse *about* faith—about realities, *Sachverhalte*—then this objectifying function should also be applied to the history of theological controversy itself. Theology's task is not to preserve such conflict, but to describe, analyse, interpret, and explain it. This observation leads directly to the postulate of a non-confessional or trans-confessional theology.

Toward a Christian Non-Confessional/Trans-Confessional Theology

Any attempt to justify the possibility of a non-confessional or trans-confessional theology must begin by asking what renders theology credible. Two elements appear decisive here: first, a concentration on theology's fundamental concern, namely God; and second, theology's adequacy in relation to the existential challenges of human life.

The call to return to the "foundation" arises from the recognition that over the centuries many fictitious problems and artificial barriers have been created. In the face of the contemporary crisis of faith and the frequent questioning of theology's relevance, what is needed is a renewed focus on what is essential. Christian identity, properly understood, is above all the gift of the Spirit of Christ, to whom one must remain faithful.[13] The Christianity of the future—and theology within it—must therefore concentrate more clearly on the fundamental truths of faith. Particularly significant in this regard is the conciliar notion of the "hierarchy of truths."[14] This concept allows one to discern within Christian doctrine an order of proportion, priority, and existential significance. The principle of the hierarchy of truths shifts attention away from the Church as such and redirects it toward the incomprehensible God.

In other words, the principal "melody" of theology must be the centrality of the triune God in human life and thought, and this entails a return to the simplicity of faith in the God revealed in Christ. Churches divided along confessional lines, together with their theologies, often display an excessive preoccupation with themselves, jealously guarding their own denominational interests. Yet what ought to stand in the foreground is the search for and knowledge of God. Secularism and practical atheism press Christians—and theologians in particular—to

[13] Wacław Hryniewicz, *Na drodze pojednania. Medytacje ekumeniczne* (Warszawa: Verbinum, 1998), 219.

[14] Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis redintegratio* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), no. 11, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html. See also William Henn, "The Hierarchy of Truths Twenty Years Later," *Theological Studies* 48 (1987): 439–71, https://doi.org/10.1177/004056398704800302; Catherine E. Clifford, "The 'Hierarchy' of Truths in a New Context," *Theological Studies* 85, no. 1 (2024): 10–33, https://doi.org/10.1177/00405639231225145.

concentrate on those truths of faith that they hold in common. This in turn requires evaluative and critical reflection on one's own confessional tradition, as well as openness to interpretations developed in other traditions.[15]

If theology is to be credible within the contemporary arena of competing meanings and worldviews, it must also be existential in character. It must become a dialogical attempt to respond to the crisis of thought, life, and unbelief that expresses itself, often ambiguously, in expanding forms of secularization. What is at stake here is a coherent and holistic interpretation of the mystery of human existence in the world. Such an existential theology must therefore be comprehensive and integrative. It must seek an account of life transformed by the grace of the triune God that is coherent, inclusive, and thus capable of transcending confessional limitation. A theology of this kind would be not only existential and holistic, but also ecumenical and genuinely Christian in the fullest sense.[16]

Challenges for a Christian Non-Confessional/Trans-Confessional Theology: Rethinking Theology's Ecclesiality

The primary difficulty raised by the proposal for a non-confessional or trans-confessional theology concerns the close and constitutive relation between theology and the Church. The Church is the indispensable soil in which theology is rooted. In this sense, university theology is not simply a secularized form of religious studies; its task is the scholarly exploration of the deposit of faith and of the concrete reality of the Church. Since the Church presently exists in differentiated forms—Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox—theology too has generally taken confessional form.

At the same time, theology requires a relative degree of independence and autonomy if it is to fulfil its vocation within the Church. It must be creative. Because revelation is universal in scope, theology cannot be confined within any one historically conditioned form. It must continually reopen the future of faith. In this sense, theology points beyond the present toward the future of both faith and the Church. By its very nature, it must be "progressive" in the proper sense: oriented toward building the future of the Church and willing to engage in provisional, even experimental, forms of thought.[17] Such experimental openness may also need to be applied to theology's own relation to the Church.

[15] Hryniewicz, *Na drodze pojednania*, 253–54.

[16] See Joseph Ratzinger, *Der Gott des Glaubens und der Gott der Philosophen. Philosophische Vernunft—Kultur —Europa—Gesellschaft*, JRGS 3/1 (Freiburg, Basel and Wien: Herder, 2020), 189–210; Robert Woźniak, *Praca nad dogmatem* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2022), 206–8.

[17] Karl Lehmann, "Gesellschaft–Wissenschaft–Kirche," in *Bindung an die Kirche oder Autonomie? Theologie im gesellschaftlichen Diskurs*, ed. Albert Franz (Freiburg, Basel, and Wien: Herder, 1999), 17–29.

To What Extent Is Theology Autonomous Vis-à-Vis the Church?

Following the Second Vatican Council, it has become increasingly common to understand the triad of Revelation, Scripture, and Tradition in such a way that theology itself—precisely as a scholarly discipline—plays an essential role in mediating the truth of revelation. Within the broader Christian tradition, there is little disagreement about the need to distinguish between constitutive tradition and interpretive tradition. The latter includes the pronouncements of the Church's magisterium, but also other historical forms in which the Church continues itself—including theology. Put differently, theology is itself a mode of the Church's self-continuation in history, as an element of interpretive tradition in relation to the constitutive acts that establish the deposit of revelation. In this sense, one may speak—by analogy with the ecclesial magisterium—of a scholarly teaching office proper to theologians. This idea can be traced back to Thomas Aquinas, who distinguished between the *magisterium cathedrae pastoralis* and the *magisterium cathedrae magistralis*. A comparable distinction appears in Melchior Cano's system of *loci theologici*, where the *auctoritas theologorum* occupies a distinct place. This authority is not simply derivative; it possesses its own relative autonomy and cannot be wholly subordinated to the other *loci*.

The scholarly "office" of theology is thus a distinct and proper service within the Church, though one that exists in interrelation with other offices, ministries, and charisms. This relation, however, is one of mutual dependence, not of simple subordination. Theology possesses a genuine freedom, but it is a freedom exercised *for* the Church and *for* the truth.[18]

The magisterium's right to an authentic interpretation of the Word of God cannot mean reducing theology to the mere repetition of inherited formulas and the defensive preservation of doctrinal expressions as fixed possessions. If that were the case, Christianity would risk appearing as a museum of former beliefs. W. Hryniewicz rightly observed that in the Catholic Church one must still defend the conviction that doctrinal interpretation and development may be the only way to remain faithful to doctrine itself.[19] "Heresy," he noted, "may arise not only through the explicit denial of already defined formulas; it may also arise through a narrow devotion to such formulas when, over time, they have hardened and lost

[18] Christian Böttigheimer and René Dausner, "Eigenständiger Lebensvollzug der Kirche. Zur Bedeutung der universitären Theologie," in *Unabhängige Theologie. Gefahr für Glaube und Kirche?*, ed. Benjamin Leven (Freiburg, Basel, and Wien: Herder, 2016), 167; Rajmund Porada, "The 'Magisterium' of Theology in the Church. Theology in Tension between Credibility, Fidelity and Obedience," *ET–Studies* 14, no. 2 (2023): 267.

[19] Wacław Hryniewicz, *Hermeneutyka w dialogu. Szkice teologiczno-ekumeniczne. T. 2* (Opole: Wydawnictwo św. Krzyża, 1998), 87, 89. See Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), no. 44, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

contact with a new situation entirely different from that in which a particular confession of faith first took shape."[20]

In a similar vein, J. Werbick describes theology's task as a service aimed at articulating the meaning and contemporary relevance of Christianity. The challenge is to ensure that, under radically changed conditions of faith and within entirely new intellectual horizons, the authentic message of salvation can still be heard as ever new and irreplaceable. This process is undeniably risky. It may involve error and distortion. Yet awareness of this risk does not absolve theology of its responsibility. If theology belongs to the interpretive tradition of revelation, then it shares with the other elements of that tradition a distinct ecclesial vocation: namely, to contribute to the ongoing purification of the doctrinal language of the Church so that it may express the truth of revelation as adequately as possible. In this respect, not only does the magisterium have the right to correct theologians and call them to conversion; theology, too, may support—and at times even admonish—the magisterium in the way it articulates the truths of faith. What is needed is a continual *metanoia* of all instances involved in the transmission of faith: a sustained conversion of thought, freeing human understanding from its sinful distortions and bringing it closer to the fullness of truth.[21]

The Ecclesiality of Theology

The ecclesial nature of theology should not, therefore, be understood as a form of confinement. On the contrary, theology may and indeed should correct ecclesial teaching when it discerns signs of stagnation. Its task is to serve as an advocate for new insights and methods to which official ecclesial teaching may initially be resistant. Its ecclesiality is expressed precisely in helping the People of God overcome serious failures of judgment and in enabling them to make meaningful use of new intellectual and cultural developments.

Admittedly, there is a danger here of excessive adaptation to the *Geist der Wissenschaft*, the spirit of modern scholarship. Yet, as Werbick observes, this danger is no greater than the equally problematic adaptation to a supposed *Geist der Tradition*. For the credibility of Christian truth, remaining rigidly on the defensive and clinging uncritically to what has "always" been said may be no less destructive. Properly understood, the ecclesiality of theology consists in defending and confirming the existential truth of God amid the difficult experiences and intellectual discourses of a given age. Where theology succeeds in doing this, divine truth finds a language that is semantically rich, compelling, and capable of calling human beings to conversion. Where it fails—or where it merely repeats inherited

[20] Hryniewicz, *Hermeneutyka w dialogu*, 88.

[21] Jürgen Werbick, "Der kirchliche Auftrag der Theologie. Für ein auskömmlicheres Verhältnis zwischen Theologie und kirchlichem Lehramt," in *Bindung an die Kirche oder Autonomie? Theologie im gesellschaftlichen Diskurs*, ed. Albert Franz (Freiburg, Basel, and Wien: Herder, 1999), 153–54.

formulas—truth risks becoming socially and existentially irrelevant, even if proclaimed with emphatic authority by the magisterium.[22]

Especially in the face of secularization, theology's task remains the retrieval of the significance of the truth about God for contemporary understandings of the world, the self, and transcendence. "Ecclesiality" cannot mean a sectarian mentality that marginalizes both the Church and theology within society and the academy. Theology can protect the Christian tradition from degenerating into a guarded body of insider knowledge accessible only to the initiated—something fundamentally at odds with the Church's mission as "the sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race."[23] Theology is ecclesial when it remains soberly attentive to what others see and suffer, and to what therefore ought also to concern the life of the Church. It is truly ecclesial when it prevents ecclesial insiders from insulating themselves against the social, intellectual, ethical, and spiritual challenges of contemporary culture. There is, after all, a mode of insider theological discourse that may appear refined and intelligent, but is in fact chiefly absorbed in its own self-admiration.[24]

The Flagship Fruit of Shared Ecumenical Theological Work: The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

The fruits of theology pursued in an ecumenical spirit can be seen particularly clearly in the documents produced by doctrinal dialogues. One of the most significant achievements of such work is the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. This document demonstrates that it is possible to formulate theological statements in a way that is not governed primarily by confessional conditioning. This is evident, among other things, from the fact that criticism of the Declaration emerged on both sides, precisely because it was seen as failing to reflect sufficiently the respective confessional *proprium* or as abstracting from particular confessional positions.

Two examples may suffice: 1) the absence of the explicit formula *sola fide*, which elicited criticism on the Lutheran side (even though the text clearly affirms reliance solely on Christ's promise rather than on one's own efforts [*Leistung*]); 2) the explicit designation of Lutheran communities as "Church."[25]

This example shows that theology pursued in the spirit of overcoming confessional restriction—that is, theology pursued in a genuinely trans-confessional

[22] Jürgen Werbick, "Theologie: eine kirchliche Wissenschaft? Begründungen und Differenzierungen im Blick auf das Projekt außerkirchlicher Theologien und Christentumswissenschaften," in *Tożsamość teologii*, ed. Andrzej Anderwald, Tadeusz Dola, and Marian Rusecki (Opole: Redakcja Wydawnictw Wydziału Teologicznego Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 2010), 287.

[23] *Lumen gentium*, no. 1.

[24] Werbick, "Theologie: eine kirchliche Wissenschaft?" 289.

[25] Walter Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits. Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), 45–46.

mode—can yield results that move beyond confessional difference.[26] In this way, theology is able to preserve its prophetic character even within the still-divided reality of the Church. The credibility of Christian theology will not ultimately rest on institutional power, ecclesiastical authority, or rootedness in any single confessional tradition. Rather, it will depend on its rootedness in human experience, in witness, in attentive listening, in openness, and in dialogue.

Conclusion

In the face of advancing secularization and the weakening of theology's social and academic standing, the question of theology's credibility has become unavoidable. The foregoing reflections suggest that theology confined within narrow confessional boundaries loses much of its persuasive force, because it remains too deeply entangled in historical divisions, inherited linguistic frameworks, and the logic of confessional self-reference. As a result, it becomes less capable of speaking convincingly to contemporary persons, who seek not the reaffirmation of particular traditions as such, but a credible account of the meaning of existence, the world, and transcendence.

This does not entail a call for a theology "without the Church," nor does it reduce theology to religious studies. On the contrary, what is required is a richer and more dynamic understanding of theology's ecclesiality—one that does not imprison theological reflection within a single confessional horizon, but allows it to serve the whole of Christianity and, indeed, the world. Theology remains rooted in the faith of the Church; yet as an element of interpretive tradition, it also bears its own responsibility, autonomy, and critical vocation. Its task is not merely to transmit inherited formulas, but to purify, reinterpret, and rearticulate them so that their meaning can become intelligible under new cultural conditions.

For this reason, what appears more credible today is a genuinely Christian theology: a theology focused on what is most essential in faith—God revealed in Jesus Christ, the existential significance of salvation, and the common core of Christian belief as ordered by the principle of the hierarchy of truths. Such theology, while remaining ecclesially grounded, would at the same time move beyond confessional narrowness and become a space of shared truth-seeking, a place of dialogue, and a means of anticipating the unity that the churches have not yet fully realized.

Ultimately, the credibility of theology in a secular age will depend less on institutional authority or the defence of the confessional status quo, and more on theology's capacity to make manifest the truth about God as salvific, existentially meaningful, and communicable. The more theology proves capable of being at once faithful to revelation, ecumenically open, and attentive to the real questions

[26] See Silvia Hell, "Einig in Verständnis der Rechtfertigung. Auf der Suche nach einem tragfähigen Konsens," in *Die Glaubwürdigkeit christlicher Kirchen. Auf dem Weg ins 3. Jahrtausend*, ed. Silvia Hell (Innsbruck and Wien: Tyrolia–Verlag, 2000), 85–113.

of contemporary humanity, the more it will retain its vitality, public relevance, and genuinely Christian credibility.

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PERFORMING CONTESTED EUROPEAN IDENTITIES:

LGBTQ+ RIGHTS AND CATHOLIC RESISTANCE IN POST-INDEPENDENCE CROATIA

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Abstract

The Croatian experience of Europeanisation since the late 1990s has demonstrated the dynamic processes wherein the nation has imagined and performed its identity, adopting "European" norms, practices and legislation as it sought to confirm its place within the family of European states. However, ethno-nationalist imaginaries and the heteronormative perspective of "traditional" Catholic belief offer another potential pathway towards expressing "European norms," particularly in relation to "gender ideology" and resistance to increased LGBTQ+ rights and visibility. What role, then, has the Croatian Catholic Church played in supporting or resisting these distinct visions of European norms and values?

In this chapter, the contemporary history of the political engagement of the Croatian Catholic Church is examined vis-à-vis these contested norms, which constitute distinct approaches to

performing European identity. In doing so, the ongoing need for theology in Europe to engage with social practice and reflect on how religious norms interact with processes of marginalisation and exclusionary boundary setting is considered. Here, a case study examining how Europeanness is performed, either through increased LGBTQ+ rights, or by enshrining traditional Christian values at the heart of Croatian politics and society, and considering the contingencies and continuities of the Church's own positions, allows for insights into how religion negotiates between LGBTQ+, European and Croatian identities, potentially resisting "EU norms."

By examining how European identity is constructed and performed in relation to LGBTQ+ matters in Croatia, the chapter considers how and why Catholic re-

ligious performance has become such a potent instrument for constructing Croatian identity as European, how the processes seen in the Croatian case might offer insights into wider forms of resistance to LGBTQ+ norms in Central and Eastern Europe, and what this could mean for ongoing debates over European identities, boundaries and forms of belonging, as expressed through appeals to tradition, history and religious performativity.

Keywords: European identity; Croatia; Catholic Church; LGBTQ+ rights; anti-gender movements; Europeanisation.

Introduction

Croatian identity has, over recent decades, become bound up with specific forms of social, political and religious norms, in a process that has accelerated since Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia in the 1990s.[1] Within that framing of Croatian identity, the Catholic Church has taken an important role, as an arbiter of what is acceptable in normative terms. This is most certainly true in recent years with regards to progressive approaches to LGBTQ+ identity, and the notion of "gender ideology," both of which have acted to challenge the "tradition" which the Catholic Church seeks to both represent and exemplify. This ethno-national identity, supported by the Church, has marginalized LGBTQ+ groups and individuals, absenting them from the public space and reinforcing heteronormative practices.[2] At the same time, the pressures of Europeanisation have meant that LGBTQ+ rights have become central to another, alternate vision of the performance of European identity in Croatia, one related to a narrative of modernization, progress and (formal and legal) acceptance.

How then, does the contestation of these two narratives, the one "traditional" and Catholic, and the other "progressive" and tolerant, resituate the notion of "being European" in the case of Croatia, and how can we conceptualise and consider this theology of marginalization as a process of exclusion, with the related negotiation of religious, national and sexual identities? What does it mean for the normative frameworks of traditional religious values and Europeanness, and how does this situate Croatia in a (de)secularizing twenty-first century Europe? Most especially, what can we learn from the Croatian case about the marginality and differentiation of groups such as the LGBTQ+ community, and how might a contextual theology of Europe help us move beyond binary thinking and read the sign of the times more clearly?

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[1] See, for example, Alex Bellamy, *The Formation of Croatian National Identity: A Centuries-Old Dream* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), especially chaps. 4 and 6.

[2] Roman Kuhar, "Playing with Science: Sexual Citizenship and the Roman Catholic Church Counter-Narratives in Slovenia and Croatia," *Women's Studies International Forum* 49 (2015): 84–92, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2014.07.005.

LGBTQ+ Visibility in Croatia: A Very Brief Introduction

To engage with these questions, a certain degree of context is required, not least in terms of the history of LGBTQ+ visibility in Croatia, and the ways in which that changed over time. Homosexuality was initially decriminalized in Croatia as part of Yugoslav reforms in 1977,[3] while the age of consent for same-sex partnerships was lowered to match heterosexual partnerships in 1998.[4] Aside from these legal changes, the emergence of local and regional LGBTQ+ movements and NGOs in the 1990s and early 2000s[5] increased the visibility of the community, as did the requirement for Croatia, as an aspiring EU member country, to guarantee rights to LGBTQ+ citizens as part of their accession process.[6]

Increased visibility in an independent Croatia was confirmed by the first Pride march, held in Zagreb in June 2002.[7] The event was controversial, with counter-protests from numerous groups, including hooligans, present to try to disrupt the route through the city centre.[8] The approximately 200 Pride marchers were faced with a significantly larger group of protesters, numbering in the high thousands,[9] and the organisers, representatives of two large queer NGOs, KONTRA and Iskorak, faced violence even before the march began.[10] Despite this difficult beginning, Zagreb Pride has continued as an established annual event, indeed it was the only march held in Croatia for almost a decade.[11]

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[3] *Yugoslavia: Criminal Code of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia*, July 1, 1977, accessed January 31, 2026, Refworld, https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/1977/en/13685.

[4] This equalization of the age of consent, at 15, remained in place after an updated law was passed in 2003. *Law on Same-Sex Community* (*Zakon o istospolnim zajednicama*), Narodne novine 116/2003 (July 22, 2003), accessed March 1, 2026, https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2003_07_116_1584.html.

[5] Katja Kahlina, "Local Histories, European LGBT Designs: Sexual Citizenship, Nationalism, and 'Europeanisation' in Post-Yugoslav Croatia and Serbia," *Women's Studies International Forum* 49 (2015): 73–83, at 77, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2014.07.006.

[6] Nicole Butterfield, "The Limits of Legal Discourse: Discrimination against LGBTI Persons in Croatia," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 26, no. 2 (2020): 303–31.

[7] Kahlina, "Local Histories, European LGBT Designs," 77.

[8] Sanja Kajinić, "Cartographies of Fear and Freedom: Lesbian Activists in the First Belgrade and Zagreb Pride Parades," in *Lesbian Activism in the (Post-)Yugoslav Space*, ed. Bojan Bilić and Marija Radoman (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 61–85.

[9] Kajinić, "Cartographies of Fear and Freedom."

[10] The intended Master of Ceremonies, Mario Kovač, was attacked on the morning of the march; he was replaced by the human rights activists Drago Pilsel and Vesna Teršelič. See ILGA-Europe, *The State of Human Rights of Sexual and Gender Minorities in the Republic of Croatia in the Year 2002*, accessed March 1, 2026, https://web.archive.org/web/20110716234629/http://www.ilga-europe.org/content/download/4137/25574/file/izvjestaj%202002%20eng.doc.

[11] The most recent Zagreb Pride, held in mid-June 2025, was the 24th such march, and was attended by the Mayor of Zagreb and other dignitaries. See "Pod geslom 'Puna usta ponosa' počeo 24. Zagreb Pride," *Dnevnik.hr*, June 14, 2025, accessed March 1, 2026,

The first Pride march in Croatia to be held outside of Zagreb was also marred by controversy and violence. This was Split Pride, first held in June 2011, which again highlighted forms of violent opposition from a much larger counter-protest.[12] Here, again, the small number of Pride marchers were threatened, with over 130 people arrested. The media focus on this event went beyond Croatia and led to questions in the European Parliament,[13] in part due to the first-hand observations of another MEP who had joined the march in a show of support.[14] The controversy over Split Pride then continued, as the then-mayor of Split, Željko Kerum, appeared to defend the anti-Pride protesters, stating that it was too soon for a march to happen in Split, that the reaction "was to be expected," and that the will of the people should be respected in these matters.[15] Amid claim and counter-claim, the final epilogue of Split Pride 2011 came in 2023, when a final court judgement ruled that the police had not adequately protected the Pride marchers, although only civil penalties were imposed for this oversight.[16]

LGBTQ+ Matters in Croatia: Between Catholic and European "Norms"?

Although it is clear that increased LGBTQ+ visibility has altered the position of that community in Croatia, the nuances of the relationship between LGBTQ+ matters, Catholicism and Europe mean that, at times, these topics become a synecdoche for wider debates about the norms and values that modern Croatia seeks to embody. There has been a transition in the public statements of the Catholic Church in Croatia, moving from a form of passive tolerance of what happens in private in the former Yugoslavia to a proactive fusion of religion and national

https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/pod-geslom-puna-usta-ponosa-poceo-24-zagreb-pride--919112.html.

[12] Kevin Moss, "Split Pride/Split Identities." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 3, no. 2 (2016): 56–75, https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.3.2.0056.

[13] The questions were raised by the Austrian Green/ALE MEP Ulrike Lunacek, the co-president of the Parliamentary Intergroup on LGBTI Rights and Michael Cashman, the Socialist and Democrat MEP from the UK. See Michael Cashman, Written Question P-006203/2011 to the European Commission, European Parliament, accessed March 1, 2026, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/P-7-2011-006203_EN.html for Cashman's written question.

[14] This was Marije Cornelissen, the Dutch Green/ALE MEP. See Moss, "Split Pride/Split Identities," 61.

[15] "Obljetnica prvog splitskog Pridea i kako je o njemu govorio Kerum," *Direktno.hr*, accessed February 21, 2026, https://direktno.hr/zivot/obljetnica-prvog-splitskog-pridea-i-kako-o-njemu-govorio-kerum-88583/.

[16] "Ustavni sud: Policija propustila spriječiti nasilje na Prideu u Splitu 2011," *tportal*, accessed February 27, 2026, https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/ustavni-sud-policija-propustila-sprijeciti-nasilje-na-prideu-u-splitu-2011-20231202.

identity since independence in the 1990s,[17] which uses the privileged position of Catholic education to embed heteronormative attitudes and approaches to the matter of LGBTQ+ inclusion or exclusion.[18] In doing so, the Church has recentred itself in the socio-political debates about traditional values and gender roles, through educational processes and public statements.

The rising salience of LGBTQ+ matters after 2000 thus offered a potential challenge to the notion of norms and belonging in the Croatian context, one bound up with EU accession processes. As the first EU candidate required to explicitly address LGBTQ+ legislation on its path to EU membership,[19] LGBTQ+ treatment was a signifier of progress towards EU norms and values for Croatia in a markedly novel way. As such, Croatia legislated widely to ensure anti-discrimination laws were in line with EU standards, including new rules on co-habiting couples and same-sex partnerships.[20] However, despite this apparent progress, much of it might be viewed as performative, with clear red lines drawn at same-sex marriage and adoption rights. Indeed, a number of issues arise out of this performance of EU norms as apparently mandated by external institutions from Western Europe.

The first problem that emerges is that of homonationalism.[21] This becomes a question of whether certain forms of LGBTQ+ lifestyles or practices are acceptable, while others are not, and has been critiqued in the context of Central and Eastern Europe.[22] The reluctance to support adoption rights for LGBTQ+ couples or support same-sex marriage are both indicative of this kind of category thinking: it is fine for LGBTQ+ couples to live together, but not to marry or become parents. In such cases, the full rights of LGBTQ+ individuals as citizens are thus curtailed by the sense of what is socially or culturally appropriate, while the

[17] Zoran Grozdanov and Nebojša Zelič, "Religious Nationalism and Religious Governance: Overlaps and Divergences. The Case of Croatia," *Ethnicities* 24 (2024): 255–69, https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968231208267.

[18] Nataša Bijelić, "Sex Education in Croatia: Tensions between Secular and Religious Discourses," *The European Journal of Women's Studies* 15, no. 4 (2008): 329–43, https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506808095273.

[19] Piotr Godzisz, "The Europeanization of Anti-LGBT Hate Crime Laws in the Western Balkans," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 71 (2019): 291–306, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-019-09818-9.

[20] For example, *Law on Life Partnerships for Same-Sex Couples* (*Zakon o životnom partnerstvu osoba istog spola*), Narodne novine 92/2014 (July 15, 2014), accessed February 25, 2026, https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2014_07_92_1836.html.

[21] Homonationalism is a concept developed by Jasbir K. Puar, which describes the alignment of LGBTQ+ rights with nationalist political agendas, whereby the inclusion of some sexual minorities is used to reinforce national identity and legitimise the exclusion or marginalisation of other groups. See Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

[22] This critique argues that, in fact, heteronationalism is deeply embedded in much of the Central and East European space. For an overview of the debate, see Moss, "Split Pride/Split Identities."

(in)visibility of LGBTQ+ Catholics, long marginalized in Croatian society, offers another example.

A second problem arises when we consider the sense that Croatia is being tutored in "progress" by the EU, a form of leveraged pedagogy,[23] with clear paternalistic overtones. In the Croatian context, this meant seeing LGBTQ+ inclusion as a demand made externally, and an imposition of a view of "being European" by the EU. In turn, the question of what is wrong with "tradition" emerges, whereby pre-existing social and historical norms in Croatia, not least adherence to Catholicism and a sense of already being part of *Mitteleuropa*,[24] clash with the "woke" visions of a secular EU bubble. Here, the sense of being forced to adopt "un-Croatian" laws and norms creates significant tension.

Thirdly, these two visions of being or becoming European help polarize society and drive binary, either/or thinking on both sides of the debate. When tied to the socio-economic pressures of mass emigration, increasing dissatisfaction with the promises of EU membership and ambivalence about the compromises continually required of EU member states, it becomes clear that notions of progress and tradition are loaded with political significance, as discussions continue about what it is to be a "good European" or to "belong to Europe." The need here is for nuance and an admission of grey areas and fuzzy borders, for both/and approaches to inclusion and belonging. Instead, Croatian society has seen the emergence of anti-gender practices, with hard boundaries in terms of inclusion and exclusion from "mainstream" society. Certain examples of these practices and their relationship to religious identity offer case studies in framing the idea of "Europe" in Croatia in binary, either/or forms.

Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Croatia: Rejecting the EU, Regenerating Catholic Europe?

Mobilizations of coalitions of anti-gender actors in Croatia have emerged most obviously since 2010, and have in most cases been closely aligned to "traditional" concepts of family life, religion and gender roles.[25] They have also, to a degree, been opportunistic in their engagement with themes which capture the current political mood. A prime example of this is the *U ime obitelj* (In the Name of the

[23] Roberto Kulpa, "Western Leveraged Pedagogy of Central and Eastern Europe: Discourses of Homophobia, Tolerance and Nationhood," *Gender, Place & Culture* 21, no. 4 (2014): 431–48, https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.793656.

[24] Boris Blažina, "International Scientific Conference 'Central European Identity of Croatia,'"
Europske studije 2 (2015): 145–50.

[25] This has not simply been a Croatian phenomenon, but rather has been common practice across Central and Eastern Europe. See Martijn Mos, "Routing or Rerouting Europe? The Civilizational Mission of Anti-Gender Politics in Eastern Europe," *Problems of Post-Communism* 70, no. 2 (2023), 143–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2022.2050927.

Family) movement and their successful campaign to first force a referendum in 2013 and then alter the constitution to ban same-sex marriage in 2014.[26]

The organization was in fact only founded in May 2013 as a "bottom-up" movement, guided by Catholic principles and a commitment to enacting those principles in the public sphere.[27] Within this, the accent in the referendum campaign was placed on defending the traditional (heteronormative) family, and ensuring that the Constitution reflected their understanding of marriage as between a man and a woman.[28] Their use of direct democratic methods, through a petition for a referendum that gathered several hundred thousand signatures,[29] is evidence of the ways in which anti-gender actors have co-opted the methods of progressive NGOs to support a radically different vision of society. Later campaigns supported by *U ime obitelj* have included demands for the reinstatement of non-working Sundays, and the Walk of Life initiative which seeks to entrench pro-life and anti-abortion attitudes in the public debate about women's health and the right to choose.[30] In all these cases, the influence of Catholicism is clear.

A second movement that has brought Catholic religious practice into the public space is the *Muževni budite* organization, popularly known as "The Kneelers," whose exclusively male membership perform Marian devotional prayer vigils in public squares at regular intervals in major urban centres, including Zagreb and Split.[31] Emerging out of the 40 Days of Life movement in 2016, they were founded in 2019 in order to recentre traditional male roles and gender norms in Croatian society, by virtue of their public displays of devotion to the Virgin

[26] Koen Slootmaeckers and Indraneel Sircar, "Marrying European and Domestic Politics? The Marriage Referendum in Croatia and Value-Based Euroscepticism," *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 3 (2018): 321–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1457136.

[27] The emergence of the organization is described on their website as emerging from the direct attempt to redefine marriage, with the NGO being a continuation of what they term a "citizens' initiative" (*gradjanske inicijativa*). See "Aktivnosti," *U ime obitelji*, accessed February 27, 2026, https://uimeobitelji.net/aktivnosti/.

[28] The Croatian Constitution was updated in January 2014, and remains in force, with the definition of marriage provided in Article 61. See Ustavni sud Republike Hrvatske (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Croatia), *Ustav Republike Hrvatske: Redakcijski pročišćeni tekst* (Zagreb: Ustavni sud Republike Hrvatske, January 15, 2014), art. 61, accessed February 20, 2026,
https://www.usud.hr/sites/default/files/dokumenti/Redakcijski_prociscen_tekst_Ustava_Republike_Hrvatske_Ustavni_sud_Republike_Hrvatske_15._sijecnja_2014_.pdf, 17.

[29] Slootmaeckers and Sircar, "Marrying European and Domestic Politics?"

[30] "Aktivnosti," *U ime obitelji*.

[31] Vuk Tešija, "'Imported' Catholic Prayer Movement Stirs Support and Opposition in Croatia," *Balkan Insight*, August 8, 2024, accessed February 27, 2026, https://balkaninsight.com/2024/08/08/imported-catholic-prayer-movement-stirs-support-and-opposition-in-croatia/.

Mary.[32] While the total number of participants in these prayer vigils is not large,[33] the media attention and public discourse which they have generated is considerable, as is demonstrated by the petition against these vigils which gathered over 60,000 signatures in late 2025.[34]

The extent to which *Muževni budite* is an authentically Croatian grassroots movement is unclear. Certainly, there seem to be a range of transnational ties with other anti-gender actors and organisations, with suggestions that the prayer vigils in Zagreb had seen Polish-speaking organisers on the ground.[35] Transnational links between anti-gender actors include the fact that since 2024, the Croatian branch of *Ordo Iuris*, the Polish Catholic Legal Institute and think tank, have been closely linked to *Muževni budite*.[36] Given *Ordo Iuris* in Poland have a record of being anti-LGBTQ+, anti-abortion and supportive of traditional gender roles,[37] these ties, and the wider links between anti-gender actors across the Central and Eastern European region deserve further study.

A Catholic Nation and a European State?: Towards a Theology of (In)compatible Belonging

Thus, arguments about what it means to be "European," and which symbolic and real impact those social, political and theological arguments generate, are central to a clear understanding of the Croatian context, and call on us to engage with a theology of Europe that takes seriously the notions of belonging, inclusion and exclusion. While there may seem to be a clear divide between what is claimed by "traditional" Croatian identity, with its focus on social conservatism in line with Catholic teaching, and a more progressive European identity built around LGBTQ+ inclusion and adherence to EU norms, the division of either/or is unhelpful. Rather than see these two visions of Croatian belonging in and to Europe as mutually exclusive, it is important to acknowledge that they are equally present

[32] Marina Katinić Pleić, "Pokretač pokreta 'Muževni budite' dr. Krunoslav Puškar: 'Muškarci s krunicom u ruci razbijaju stereotipe,'" *Glas Koncila*, July 20, 2023, accessed February 28, 2026, https://www.glas-koncila.hr/pokretac-pokreta-muzevni-budite-dr-krunoslav-puskar-muskarci-s-krunicom-u-ruci-razbijaju-stereotipe/.

[33] Vuk Tešija, "Ultra-Catholic Male 'Kneelers' Fail to Convert Croatia," *Balkan Insight*, April 7, 2023, accessed February 27, 2026, https://balkaninsight.com/2023/04/07/ultra-catholic-male-kneelers-fail-to-convert-croatia/.

[34] "Protestanti stali u obranu molitelja: Oglasili se o peticiji koja je uzburkala javnost," *Direktno.hr*, December 11, 2025, accessed February 27, 2026, https://direktno.hr/domovina/protestanti-stali-obranu-molitelja-oglasili-se-o-peticiji-koja-uzburkala-javnost-386070/.

[35] Tešija, "Ultra-Catholic Male 'Kneelers' Fail to Convert Croatia."

[36] Members of *Ordo Iuris* in Croatia have written for the *Muževni Budite* website, and close links between both organisations have been claimed. See "Mržnja iz uvoza," *SABH*, accessed February 28, 2026, https://sabh.hr/mrznja-iz-uvoza/ for details.

[37] See *Ordo Iuris*, accessed February 26, 2026, https://www.ordoiuris.pl/en for an overview of their activities in Poland.

in the debates about the future direction of Croatian society. However, it is perfectly possible to view these issues not as either/or, but rather both/and: both modern and traditional, both forward looking and nostalgic, and, perhaps crucially, European—both because of geography and history, on the one hand, and an adherence to European values, on the other.

On considering this from a theological perspective, the best question to ask is thus not where Croatia is, but when. Following Kalmar,[38] and his insistence that Eastern Europe has long been marginalized as "not quite" fully European, we might look at Croatia and wonder whether it is marginal both spatially and temporally: accidentally left behind in a grey zone between an imagined national past and an uncertain "European" present, with both history and the future becoming battlegrounds for competing truth claims and boundary-making. In this context, finding out where Croatia belongs, where it "fits" in our imagined geographies of progress and identity, becomes a clear task of theology in Europe today: even in a secularizing Europe, it is clear that faith, too, is a landscape for debate in Croatia about fundamental questions of identity, normative orders and belonging. As such, a contextual theology of that debate is vital to a nuanced understanding of the situation.

More broadly, and following from the theme of the conference, there is a need not simply to promote theology *in* Europe, but instead reconsider how building a theology *of* Europe, and of being European, becomes a crucial task in moving beyond our geographies of difference and differentiation. Do we do "Europe" to ourselves, or is it done to us by others? What does it mean to "belong" in Europe, and what norms and values are central to that understanding which, perhaps, derive from traditions of shared faith? What does it really mean to uphold European identity, or to think of ourselves as part of Europe?

A theological perspective on these questions might allow us to recontextualise the margins and fringes of contemporary "Europe," and those communities, such as the LGBTQ+ community in Croatia, who are forced to the edges of the public space and become mere symbols or metaphors, rather than individuals with thoughts and feelings. In doing so, a contextual theology of Europe might help us reconsider our binary, either/or visions of being European, and allow us to be both/and: both Catholic and LGBTQ+, both national and European, both in Europe and of Europe. Creating such a theology of Europe, one that is open, contextual and attentive to all voices and perspectives, seems not just a suitable task for theology today, but rather a vitally relevant and urgent mission.

[38] Ivan Kalmar, *White but Not Quite: Central Europe's Illiberal Revolt* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022).

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NEO-MARXISTS TODAY SAY: THE CHURCH WAS AND IS AGAINST KNOWLEDGE AND SCIENCE.

IS IT TRUE OR IS IT A FABRICATION?

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Abstract

This chapter considers the question: whether the Church was really against true knowledge, against science, against the truth that derives from nature, physics, biology and astronomy, or psychology or philosophy? Despite the appearance of the so-called Enlightenment, Marxists or contemporary neo-Marxists, the argument that this chapter will make is no, quite the opposite. This chapter argues that the Church has always promoted education, culture and true knowledge. There have been many institutions in the Church throughout its history, examples given include monastic schools, cathedral schools, universities, religious congregations (e.g. School brothers, Ursulines, Jesuits) that dealt with education and formation; this formation process has undergone a long development. The chapter demonstrates that Christianity and the Church provided a "suitable environment" wherein science and the progress of humanity in knowledge arose and developed. At all times, there have been personalities of the Church who have tried to improve it, to create more suitable conditions for children and young people for their development and maturation. Among them, St. John the Baptist de La Salle, the founder of modern education as we know it today, stands out by his actions and fundamental improvements in education and upbringing procedures.

Keywords: Education; university; Middle Ages; Church schools; monastic schools; cathedral schools; Institute of School Brothers, FSC.

Introduction

In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, representatives of the Communist Party often proclaimed: the Church is a reactionary, "obscurantist" institution in

its orientation, it is best suited to uneducated people, whom it could and can control more easily, it was directed against science, it burned Giordano Bruno (1548–1600, Rome),[1] it was best suited to the dark age of the Middle Ages, it keeps people in the dark, it does not want people to grow in knowledge, and so on. At the same time, it is my argument, that these representatives of the Communist Party interpreted history in a one-sided and tendentious way, e.g. the case of Galileo. Many from the old East and Central European countries claim that the teaching of Marxism, which they had listened to until the fall of the Iron Curtain, have now begun to be repeated in the so-called progressive West, from the mouths of neo-Marxists, liberals and so-called progressives. These groups have come up with a new morality (diametrically opposed to the one proclaimed by the Church), and at the same time some proclaim a new anthropological and cultural revolution is taking place.

Marxists, atheists and socialists of brown or red stamp claimed, and many liberals, neo-Marxists and progressives still claim, that religion justifies and covers ignorance.[2] In making these claims they do not seem to ask themselves: Who founded the first universities in Europe? Weren't monasteries the first centres of culture and science? It seems, to me that those who are now trying to rewrite history want to claim that the German and English languages—like many others (including Slovak since the time of Old Church Slavonic/Slovak and the cultural feat of St. Cyril and Methodius in Slovak history) were not influenced in their formation by the Bible and Christianity.

The Church and Medieval Universities

It can be argued that these arguments can be refuted by facts from history. For example, we can thank the Middle Ages and the Church for the university system, because there was nothing analogous in ancient Greece or the Roman Empire.[3] Since then, the institution of the university has practically not changed in anything substantial: it was then that the system of study was created, divided into bachelor's and master's studies with faculties, fields of study, examinations and degrees. Historian Lowrie Daly argues: the university system was created by the Church because it was "the only institution in Europe that has persistently shown

[1] Giordano Bruno was sentenced to death by burning by the Roman Inquisition for his heretical teachings, which he refused to retract. Historians only guess what those heretical points of the ordained Dominican priest (1572) could have been, because the records of the trial have not been preserved. He was known for his defence of Arianism (he denied the divine nature of Christ) before he left the order. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* characterizes him as "an Italian philosopher, astronomer (astrologer), mathematician and occultist." See "Giordano Bruno," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed November 8, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Giordano-Bruno.

[2] Ján Horský, *Sona's Advice* (Bienne–Roma: G. C. A., 1977), 235.

[3] Thomas Woods, *Ako Katolícka cirkev budovala západnú civilizáciu* (Bratislava: Postoj Media, 2021), 65–66.

an interest in the preservation and development of knowledge."[4] The roots of the universities of Bologna and Paris go back to the cathedral schools.[5] The Church provided intellectual support to the universities, and the Roman Pontiff played a key role in their establishment and further support, and since their establishment many members of the Church, particularly priests taught in these universities. By the time the Protestant movement of reformation began, 81 universities had been established, of which 33 had a founding charter only by the pope, 21 papal and royal (the rest: 15 only royal, 13 none).[6] At the highest educational institutions, the rule was that degrees (and thus permission—license to teach; compare today "licentiate" in Catholic universities) could only be awarded by the university with the consent of the pope or monarch. For example, the University of Oxford was granted this right by Innocent IV in 1254. The license to teach from the pope was universal throughout the Christian world, titles granted only by the monarch were generally valid only in the kingdom in which the diplomas were issued.

The vicars of Christ often intervened in favour of the universities, for example, Pope Honorius III (1216–27) in 1220 unequivocally sided with the Bolognese scholars[7] who objected to the restriction of their freedoms.[8] It was common for universities to submit their grievances directly to the pope in Rome. Pope Alexander IV (1254–61) called the discipline of study at the University of Paris a "shining lamp in the house of the Lord," which was "a fruitful mother of learning, sending forth with force rivers from the fountains of saving wisdom to irrigate

[4] Lowrie John Daly, *The Medieval University, 1200–1400* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 4. From the sixth century onwards, the Church had *monastic schools*, i.e. educational institutions attached to medieval monasteries; at the beginning in the 6th–12th centuries, they were mainly associated with Benedictine convents. Even then, the basis of education was the seven liberal arts. In the early Middle Ages, the network of monastic schools was of fundamental importance for maintaining the continuity of education. Of these schools, the schools in Fulda, St. Galen and Reichenau achieved the highest quality. Ivan Paulička, ed., *General Encyclopaedic Dictionary S-Ž* (Prague: Otto Publishing House, 2002), 409.

[5] *Cathedral schools* were medieval educational institutions at the main episcopal churches and basilicas. They were of greatest importance in the 11th and 12th centuries. Their goal was to teach and form the clergy for the needs of the diocese. Seven liberal arts were taught there. Some also cultivated literary education, others aimed at the development of philosophical thinking. Cathedral schools were demonstrably among the institutions from which medieval universities grew. Among the most important were the *cathedral schools* in Chartres, Bologna, Angers, Padua, Liège, Magdeburg, Mainz, Paris, Reims, Tours, Worms and Utrecht. Paulička, *General Encyclopaedic Dictionary S-Ž*, 409.

[6] Woods, *Ako Katolícka cirkev budovala západnú civilizáciu,* 66–67.

[7] The University of Bologna (Italy) lists 1088 AD as its year of foundation.

[8] Woods, *Ako Katolícka cirkev budovala západnú civilizáciu,* 68–69.

the barren face of the world."[9] According to Daly, "the most persistent and greatest protector of universities was the Pope of Rome. He granted, extended and protected their privileged position in a world often dominated by contradictory powers."[10]

Individual popes thus acted as the most zealous protectors of the university system from its beginnings and an authority to which teachers and students regularly turned. The Church granted founding charters, protected the rights of universities, sided with scholars against the undue interference of despotic authorities, built the international academic community with the privilege of *ius ubique docendi*, and enabled and supported to a large extent free scientific debate and discussion,[11] which we still associate with the term "university" today. The argument of this chapter is that no other institution has done more to promote the dissemination of knowledge than the Church—whether through universities or by other means.

Likewise, the historian Henri Daniel-Rops (1901–65) states: "Thanks to the repeated intervention of the papacy, higher education was able to spread further into the world; the Church was the form in which the university was created, the nest from which it flew into the world." [12]

Catholicism as such and scholasticism in the Middle Ages must be credited with serious contribution to the development of Western science. Historian, theologian and natural scientist Jaki claims[13] that Christian ideas were far from hindering the development of science, but on the contrary, they helped to implement it. Stanley Laslo Jaki (1924–2009) emphasizes that the Christian tradition from the beginning to the present day understands God and God's creation as reasonable and orderly.[14] The Bible also evaluates the regularity of natural phenomena as a reflection of God's goodness, beauty and order. For if the Lord has wonderfully arranged the great works of His wisdom, it is mainly because *He was before*

[9] Alexander IV, *Quasi lignum vitae*, April 14, 1255, in *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis*, ed. Heinrich Denifle and Émile Chatelain, vol. 1, *Ab anno MCC usque ad annum MCCLXXXVI* (Paris: Delalain, 1889), no. 247, at 279.

[10] Daly, *The Medieval University, 1200–1400,* 202.

[11] Woods, *Ako Katolícka cirkev budovala západnú civilizáciu,* 70.

[12] Henri Daniel-Rops, *Cathedral and Crusade* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1957), 308.

[13] Stanley L. Jaki, *Science and Creation: From Eternal Cycles to an Oscillating Universe* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986), 150f.

[14] Born in Hungary, he was a member of the Benedictine order. From 1975 until his death, he held the position of university professor at Seton Hall University (South Orange, New Jersey, USA). He died in 2009 in Madrid, Spain, where he stopped after giving lectures in Rome. He received the Templeton Prize for a significant understanding of science and religion in 1987. He wrote more than two dozen books. In 2018, he was included by the Catholic organization Aleteia among the five Catholic scientists (the others are Copernicus, Gregor Jan Mendel, Augustinian monk and abbot of the Monastery of St. Thomas in Brno (1822–1884), priest G. Mercani, volcanologist, and priest G. Lemaitre, theoretical physicist and mathematician) who "created an understanding of our world."

the ages and will be forever (Sir 42:21).[15] S. L. Jaki states, evaluating the OT, "The world, being the work of the highest rational Being, is endowed with laws and meaning." One can also observe this law from one's own experience. "The regular alternation of the seasons, the infallible movement of the stars (and planets),[16] the music of the spheres, the action of the forces of nature according to the established regulations, all this is the result of the one who alone can be safely trusted." The same is true of the verses of the prophet Jeremiah about the sure repetition of the harvest as evidence of God's goodness, or the parallel drawn "between the untiring love of the Lord and the eternal commandments by which the Lord has determined the movement of the stars and the tides of the sea."[17]

In the Book of Wisdom it is stated that God—the Creator—arranged everything in measure, number and weight (Wis. 11:20). As the historian S. L. Jaki argues, this biblical truth not only provided support at the end of antiquity to Christians who defended the rationality of the universe (as opposed to other religions and cultures), but also inspired a millennium later those Christians who, at the beginning of modern science, embarked on qualitative research; their goal, to better understand the created world and the laws that God put into it.

The idea of a rational, orderly and functioning universe according to internal laws has eluded other cultures and civilizations. It contained an element of creativity and was irreplaceable for the progress of real science. One of Jaki's central claims is that it was not (at all) accidental that the birth of science as an autonomous field of intellectual endeavour took place in the Catholic environment. He demonstrates and argues that some key Christian ideas and frameworks have been irreplaceable and have determined the development of scientific thought.

In non-Christian cultures, which did not have the same philosophical tools (Jaki basically distinguishes: Babylonian, Egyptian, Hindu, Chinese, Greek, Arabic-Islamic and Mayan), science reached a dead end. In his work *Science and Creation*, Jaki states that it was their burden with conceptual systems that hindered the development of scientific knowledge. For example, the concepts of the universe of given civilizations and their lack of faith in the real Creator, who equipped his creation with logical physical laws, are such dead ends. On the contrary, they understood the world and the universe as a huge organism ruled by a pantheon of deities and fatalistically condemned to an eternal cycle of birth, death and rebirth. This made it directly impossible for them to develop science as such. They attributed their own minds and wills to created things; this almost precluded exam-

[15] "The connection between the rationality of the Creator and the permanence of nature is worth noting, because it is there that the idea of the autonomy of nature and its laws originates." Jaki, Science and Creation, 150. See also Jeremiah 5:24; 31:35 and Ps 19:3–7; 8:4; 104:9.

[16] An example is the Earth itself. If it orbited closer to the Sun, its surface would burn, if further, it would be covered with ice. Neither in the first nor in the second case would it be possible to live on it.

[17] Woods, *Ako Katolícka cirkev budovala západnú civilizáciu,* 101.

ining them as things that would behave according to regular, Someone-determined models. Christianity—on the contrary—understood the universe as a kingdom of order, internal laws and predictability.

S. L. Jaki does not deny these cultures the achievement of a few remarkable technological achievements, but he notes that the flourishing of official and continuous scientific research cannot be observed in them. That is why another American author could write that "the older technical innovations of Greco-Roman times, Islam, imperial China, not to mention those from prehistory, are not the result of scientific research, rather they could be (only) called traditions, procedures, experiences, methods, crafts, technology, engineering, machinery, cognition, or simply knowledge."[18]

Today's neo-Marxists everywhere exalt and, with some intent, still emphasize the "Galileo affair" (and interpret it unilaterally). At the same time, it is true that no other institution provided more support (both social and financial; the domes of basilicas were often small observatories) to astronomical research in the period six centuries to the "Enlightenment" than the Catholic Church. The Church's contribution to science, however, did not stop at astronomy. Indeed, Catholic theological thought provided the basis for much scientific progress.[19] Loyal sons of the Church (e.g. Louis Pasteur, Carl Linné/Linnaeus, Leibnitz, Max Planck) as well as priests (e.g. Andrej Kmeť in Slovakia) constantly showed interest in science—from mathematics to optics, biology, astronomy, geology and many other scientific disciplines. The emergence of modern science in the Catholic environment of Western Europe can be clearly argued from consideration of historical facts and was certainly not accidental.

Conclusion

Let us return to the question: Was the Church really against true knowledge, against science, against the truth that derives from nature, physics, biology and astronomy, or psychology or philosophy? As has been argued in this chapter that the answer must be no. Indeed, the argument is quite the opposite. The Church has always promoted education, culture and true knowledge. This chapter has sought to argue that Christianity and the Church were the "suitable environment" in which science and the progress of humanity in knowledge arose and developed. At all times, there have been personalities of the Church who have tried to improve it, to create more suitable conditions for children and young people for their development and maturation.

[18] Woods, *Ako Katolícka cirkev budovala západnú civilizáciu,* 103, quotes R. Stark, *For the Glory of God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 125.

[19] Woods, *Ako Katolícka cirkev budovala západnú civilizáciu,* 143–144.

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EMBRACING AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF LIMITS:

HOW DISABILITY THEOLOGY OFFERS RESOURCES TO RESIST THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT

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Abstract

The body is a common metaphor for representing community in both theology and politics. This metaphor envisions communities as functioning in a way that is analogous to the physical body, but scrutiny is needed regarding what kind of body is imagined and the norms it produces. The rhetoric of the Catholic and Christian right in the Republic of Ireland on immigration and demographic change reveals an implicit understanding of the body politic. This understanding is characterised by a container mentality with firm boundaries and a mechanistic conception of the body that prioritises internal coherence. This understanding reflects a fear of vulnerability. Against this understanding, disability theology offers resources for reinterpreting the body metaphor. Rather than fearing vulnerability and limits, disability theology recognises that they are normal and shifts attention to adaptation. Furthermore, it requires recognising that the body is not a machine, challenging the idea that to belong to the body requires one to be productive and to conform. Instead, it highlights the messiness of the body. Recognising the social body's relational and porous nature means rejecting the idea that it is static and instead to expect continual change.

Keywords: Disability theology, body politic, Christian right, immigration, vulnerability, national identity, Ireland

Introduction

In both theology and politics, the body is used as a metaphor for a nation, a community, and the Church. The idea of the body politic imagines a polity as functioning in a way analogous to a physical body. With its long history of interpretation, the body metaphor can be taken for granted, but it is crucial to consider

how the body is imagined, since it contains normative assumptions. Rather than focus primarily on ecclesiastical bodies, this chapter examines the Catholic and Christian-right rhetoric in the Republic of Ireland and its implicit approach to the body politic. The debate on how a Christian is to respond to immigration reveals a tacit approach to the body. This is evident through the bodily language that is used to express alarm over immigration; for example, it is said that a country is overwhelmed, crippled, and invaded, and that immigrants are parasites who pollute and infect communities.

Ireland's identity is changing, raising the question of what qualities will be accepted as Irish in a post-Catholic Ireland and who will be permitted to belong. How the body metaphor is envisioned will shape what kinds of change can be accepted. To begin, the chapter will give a brief overview of Catholicism in Ireland and how the right approaches immigration. The focus will then shift to highlight two aspects of this tacit body metaphor: a container mentality and a vision of society that imagines the body as a machine whose parts work together. The difficulty with this approach is that it ignores the reality of the body, that it is porous and subject to limits. By engaging with disability theology, the final part will consider how the body politic metaphor can be reimagined to move away from a mechanistic understanding. While this chapter uses Ireland as a case study, the arguments about how the body is imagined and contested in public and religious discourse have relevance for other societies facing debates over national identity and immigration.

Framing the Debate: Religion, Identity, and the Social Body

Today, many countries are facing a rise in nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment. The reasons for this shift are varied and complex, including the effects of globalisation, increased migration, refugee movements and perceptions of economic and social scarcity. In such contexts, nationalist rhetoric often assumes that a nation's identity is in danger of being lost and must therefore be defended. Implicitly, this reflects a logic similar to Theseus's *Paradox*, which asks if a ship can still be regarded as the same ship once all of its components are replaced. There is an anxiety about how much change can be endured without eroding a national identity. Those who express nationalist and anti-immigrant sentiments often seek to preserve what they perceive to be a threatened national identity. Yet this fails to recognise that national identity rarely adheres to a single stable narrative and has always been contested and evolving. These tensions are visible in the Republic of Ireland, where debates over immigration reveal some of the challenges in how national identity and cultural continuity are understood. The rightward shift in Ireland should not be overstated; in the general election of 2024, no

far-right candidates were elected.[1] At the same time, there have been attacks and protests at places where asylum seekers are currently residing or at proposed sites.

Nationhood has historically been understood to rest on various identity-markers, including language, a shared history, religion, culture and territorial belonging. To many around the world, Irish identity was centred on being a Catholic country. While Irish nationalism never belonged exclusively to one denomination, the oppression of the rights of Catholics under British rule, along with the high number of Catholics, meant that Catholicism came to be seen as a major aspect of Irish identity. Today, public support for the Catholic Church and Mass attendance is in decline in Ireland.[2] Catholicism after Irish Independence can be viewed as a history marked by profound institutional and cultural failure due to the Mother and Baby Homes, Magdalene Laundries and the sexual abuse crisis. There is no one reason for why the Church has lost the support of many Irish people. There is, for example, a growing divide between Church teaching and public opinion on social issues. Nevertheless, it cannot be doubted that these scandals eroded much of the goodwill towards the Church. It is unsurprising that many feel that the Catholic Church lost its moral authority.

Catholicism continues to exist, but there is now a view that Catholicism is under constant attack by a hostile dominant culture. The legalisation of both gay marriage and abortion is seen to show the diminishing influence of Catholicism. This is particularly notable given the 1983 constitutional amendment guaranteeing "the equal right to life of the pregnant woman and the unborn," which illustrates the influence that Catholicism once had on Ireland.[3] Some Catholics perceive that modern Ireland is anti-Catholic and is losing something vital due to secularisation.[4] On one level, being on the outside of mainstream culture is part of Christian

[1] See Conor Gallagher, "Far-right Candidates Fail to Break Through, Defying Global Trends," *The Irish Times,* December 1, 2024, https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2024/12/01/far-right-candidates-fail-to-break-through-defying-global-trends/; Shane Harrison, "Ireland's Far Right Flopped in the General Election—but Its Threat Remains," *The World Today* (Chatham House), December 9, 2024, https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2024-12/irelands-far-right-flopped-general-election-its-threat-remains.

[2] See America Staff, "Infographic: Catholic Identity in Ireland in a Rapid Fall," *America: The Jesuit Review,* February 15, 2024, https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2024/02/15/catholic-identity-ireland-247328/; Iona Institute for Religion and Society, "What Irish People Think of the Church, Christianity and Religion," May 23, 2025, https://ionainstitute.ie/what-irish-people-think-of-the-church-christianity-and-religion.

[3] *Constitution (Eighth Amendment) Act 1983*, *Irish Statute Book*, https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1983/ca/8/enacted/en/print.

[4] See David Quinn, "With Decline of the Catholic Church in Ireland Something Precious and Meaningful is Being Lost," *The Irish Independent*, April 14, 2024, https://www.independent.ie/opinion/comment/david-quinn-with-decline-of-the-catholic-church-in-ireland-something-precious-and-meaningful-is-being-lost/a546195501.html; Cole Kinder, "Ire-

life. As Rowan Williams observes, conversion for early Christians "is *choosing to be different*; it is a step out of the culture you once belonged in."[5] It involves asking critical questions of the culture that one is part of in light of the gospel, not just as an individual but for one's community. At the same time, it is crucial to recognise that those who are not Christian have something to contribute to the common good and public conversation.

A recurring issue is the reduction of Christian values to abortion and sexual ethics, which has meant that some Catholics and Christians interpret Christian ethics primarily through the lens of the so-called cultural wars and align themselves with those who share these convictions. While there is an open question of whether the addition of anti-immigration sentiment is a result of these alliances or opposition to the mainstream, there is a body of people who view Ireland as a Catholic or Christian country and identify the rise of immigration and the change in values as an attack on the character of Ireland. This right-wing movement is not a single entity but a spectrum with internal factions and contradictions; nonetheless, it increasingly identifies with Catholicism and Christianity as under attack by liberal Ireland.

The issue is not that Christians bring their religious convictions into the public square, but the manner in which they do so. In his book *The Best Catholics in the World,* Derek Scally wonders whether there is the possibility for a new conversation between the Church and Irish society. Drawing on the work of the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, he points to how religion can be a source of solidarity and can critique "alienating forces of the modern world."[6] As a Catholic theologian in Ireland, I do see religion and theology as having something to contribute to public discourse. But where I differ is that one cannot ignore the reality that the Republic of Ireland is now a multicultural society and that there are those who are hostile or ambivalent to Christianity. In appealing to theological concepts and imagery, the purpose is not to exclude, because I agree with David Tracy that: "The great religious classics (texts, events, persons, rituals, symbols), even if one is not a believer, have much to suggest for reflection by any serious thinker in the public realm."[7]

The problem is that this vision of public theology as dialogical and solidaristic is not the one that animates much right-wing Christian rhetoric in Ireland. Instead,

land Is No Longer a Catholic Nation," *Crisis Magazine,* November 4, 2022, https://crisismagazine.com/opinion/ireland-is-no-longer-a-catholic-nation; Paloma López Campos, "Katie Ascough: 'Ireland, for the Most Part, Is a Very Anti-Catholic Country,'" *Omnes*, February 25, 2023, https://www.omnesmag.com/en/focus/irlanda-interview-katie-ascough-called-to-more/.

[5] Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 66. Emphasis in original.

[6] Derek Scally, *The Best Catholics in the World: The Irish, the Church and the End of a Special Relationship* (Dublin: Penguin, 2021), 259–60.

[7] David Tracy, "Three Kinds of Publicness in Public Theology," *International Journal of Public Theology* 8 (2014), 332, https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-12341354.

Church leaders are portrayed as contributing to this decline, and this can be seen in particular with immigration. The conservative Irish news website Gript published an article where Tomás O'Reilly writes: "Still reeling from internal rot… Catholic institutions today often operate like hostages, afraid to speak plainly. The result is a faith gently hijacked, steered toward liberal goals under a pious disguise."[8] He critiques the Catholic Bishops' Conference letter "One Hundred Thousand Welcomes," which promoted the hospitality towards migrants, because it is seen as reflecting a "globalist" perspective. He argues that this is the adoption of mass migration, and it confuses it with charity.[9] Similarly, the site Catholic Arena describes many in the Church as falling "for the trick of these atheists to alter the demographic character of our country" and calling NGOs "Godless organisations who ostensibly don't have the interests of Catholics at heart."[10] While these are just two examples, any mention of immigration by Church leaders, institutions or newspapers will receive many angry comments of this kind, despite Catholic Social Teaching's emphasis on the right to migrate in order to live a life free from persecution or want.[11] The contested nature of Irish identity that is being raised by immigration and the changing demographics raises the question of how the body of Ireland is meant to work together.

Containers, Cogs, and the Mechanistic Body Politic

Proponents of Christian conservative or right-wing politics often perceive themselves as outsiders in mainstream society, which might suggest that there is no conception of the body politic. They argue that their views are not given sufficient airtime, which encourages the image of a lone martyr that is unwilling to compromise the truth. While this presentation is attractive to the Christian right, who portray themselves and their allies as martyrs, the reality is that it is not only about individuals but also about imagining how churches and communities should behave. This framing places the emphasis on strength, and this impacts how the social body is envisioned. There is an expectation that one should not be in a position of retreat, but to be assertive and clear about one's message. As already indicated, Irish bishops are criticised for following the government's approach on issues such as immigration, restrictions on Masses during the COVID-19 pandemic, COVID vaccines, climate justice, and engaging in inter-religious dialogue. They are presented as betraying or confusing their flock. Irish governments

[8] Tomás O'Reilly, "Sovereignty as Sin? Catholics Can Oppose Mass Migration," *Gript,* July 27, 2025, https://gript.ie/sovereignty-as-sin-catholics-can-oppose-mass-migration/.

[9] O'Reilly, "Sovereignty as Sin?"

[10] Catholic Arena, "Obedience to Clergy in the Era of Mass Migration," November 14, 2019, https://www.catholicarena.com/latest/2019/11/14/obedience-to-clergy-in-the-era-of-mass-migration?rq=immigration.

[11] See Pius XII*, Exsul familia* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1952), https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/la/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19520801_exsul-familia.html.

are likewise interpreted as being weak for being unwilling to get tough on issues like immigration, crime or many other social ills. This perceived lack of strength has an impact on the body politic: leaders are seen as failing in their roles and, from this perspective, the rest of the body is threatened.

The challenge is whether this approach to the body politic can be justified theologically. While the focus of this chapter is on the nation state, it is important to recognise that these issues are not confined to politics alone; they are also creating divisions within the Church. The criticisms of bishops also extend to Pope Francis, whose papacy emphasised the importance of care and compassion for migrants and refugees. However, there are members of the clergy who have spoken out against immigration. In Ireland, Fr. Brendan Kilcoyne drew attention for describing Ireland as "crammed" due to immigration by people who "do not have sympathy with the country or its culture."[12] He argues for what he calls "discriminatory immigration," proposing that Europe should "only permit Christian immigration into Europe" as European history has been shaped by Christianity.[13] While such examples do not represent the entirety of Irish Catholic opinion, they reveal a discernible strand of rhetoric that is gaining visibility in public debate. This rhetoric raises questions about how compassion, hospitality, and empathy will be enacted within such a framework. There is a danger that, as in the United States, empathy is beginning to be conceived as a sin.[14] These values are coming under suspicion because they are perceived to undermine truth or moral clarity. This suspicion of mercy raises the question of whether mercy is being shown at all, and whether its absence is a distortion of justice.

The rejection of these qualities impacts how the body politic is conceived. Mercy comes from the idea of compassion, being moved by another's suffering. Throughout the Bible, verses speak to the embodied aspect of compassion and mercy, for example, the idea that one should not harden one's heart (Heb. 3:8). Likewise, the word for Christ's compassion in the Gospels, *splanchnizomai,* conveys being moved by one's bowels or internal parts.[15] But for many Christians, to be moved or softened appears to place the body politic in danger. Instead, one is expected to stand firm. There are verses that support an emphasis on steadfastness (e.g., Psalm 108:1; 1 Cor. 15:58; 2 Pet. 3:17–18), and therefore, there is a

[12] Immaculata Productions, "Immigration or Invasion? The Brendan Option 223," YouTube, 9:32–9:50, posted July 23, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I1_R7VQhONI&t=1s.

[13] Immaculata Productions, "Immigration or Invasion?" 5:19–5:47.

[14] See Sarah Jones, "The Christians Who Believe Empathy Is a Sin," *New York Magazine*, May 7, 2025, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/christian-sin-of-empathy-trump-era.html; Sam Hailes, "This Church Leader Thinks Empathy Can Be a Sin. We Asked Him to Explain Himself," *Premier Christianity*, March 31, 2025, https://www.premierchristianity.com/interviews/this-church-leader-thinks-empathy-can-be-a-sin-we-asked-him-to-explain-himself/19196.article.

[15] "σπλαγχνίζομαι," *Blue Letter Bible*, accessed August 23, 2025, https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g4697/kjv/tr/0-1/.

basis for this approach. Yet one might ask whether steadfastness must be opposed to compassion.

Compassion, understood through its bodily meaning, raises the question of proximity: are others being held close or kept at a distance? When a culture war framework takes root, there is a danger that those who differ will be kept at a distance and will not be engaged with. They are portrayed instead as a threat. The problem is not the in-group but the Other, who is cast as belonging outside the body. Solidarity becomes conditional on having something in common. The underlying argument is that one must hold on to one's values and that compassion can lead to an erosion of those values.

Valuing strength comes with a fear of vulnerability and limits. This is clearly evident in the rhetoric around immigration, where like other countries, there is the suggestion that Ireland is at a breaking point, is under invasion, and is at risk of decaying, and that multiculturalism does not work. While there is reason to question this framing, it must be recognised that for some people the fear does not come from nowhere. Ireland has a cost-of-living crisis, a housing crisis, and long waiting lists for vital services.[16] The context shows that having reservations does not necessarily mean one is racist or xenophobic. As Kevin Hargaden from the Jesuit Centre of Faith and Justice has argued, "the fundamental problem … [is the] underfunding since the global economic crash that has left our social fabric thin to the point of being threadbare."[17] The feeling of vulnerability is not wrong, but it must be asked whether the right response is to protest outside of direct provision centres or damage places that might become centres. While the concerns of vulnerable communities are understandable and should be taken seriously, one cannot allow one's fear of vulnerability and limits to stop one from

[16] "Barnardos Cost of Living 2025 Report Reveals Almost Half of Families Going Without or Cutting Down on Basic Essentials," *Barnardos*, July 8, 2025, https://www.barnardos.ie/news/press-releases/barnardos-cost-of-living-2025-report-reveals-almost-half-of-families-going-without-or-cutting-down-on-basic-essentials/;
"Homelessness: A Deepening Emergency," *Social Justice Ireland*, August 4, 2025, https://www.socialjustice.ie/article/homelessness-deepening-emergency; Eoin Burke-Kennedy, "Why Is the Housing Crisis Ireland's Most Enduring Failure?" *The Irish Times*, May 23, 2025, https://www.irishtimes.com/business/2025/05/23/irelands-enduring-failure-housing/; Cormac McQuinn, "Number of People Waiting for Disability Services Has Risen Sharply Since 2019," *The Irish Times,* March 18, 2024, https://www.irishtimes.com/health/2024/03/18/number-of-people-waiting-for-disability-services-rises-sharply-since-2019/; Maeve McTaggart and Cian Ó Broin, "GP Crisis Investigation: Rural Ireland Worst Hit as Two-Thirds Unable to Take on New Patients," *Irish Independent*, February 6, 2024, https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/gp-crisis-investigation-rural-ireland-worst-hit-as-two-thirds-unable-to-take-on-new-patients/a988706887.html.

[17] Quoted in Breda O'Brien, "Ireland Is Not Full. Neither Does It Have to Be Full of Fear," *The Irish Times*, February 4, 2024, https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/2024/02/04/breda-obrien-ireland-is-not-full-neither-does-have-to-be-full-of-fear/.

recognising other people's needs. The question is whether vulnerability has to be rejected from the body politic.

This fear of vulnerability shapes how the body politic is imagined. In response to the fear, a boundary is created, and the retention of such a boundary is believed to create stability, order and strength. The rhetoric of "Ireland for the Irish," while lacking any detail of who is Irish, attempts to determine who belongs and can legitimately access social resources. Susannah Ticciati, in her reading of Ephesians, observes a tendency which she calls "a container mentality," which at its most basic imagines that there is a border: one is either inside and a citizen or outside and an alien.[18] However, this framework does not allow for any sense that the body is a living and developing entity. The result of this emphasis on boundaries is a focus on retaining the purity of the body.

In the summer of 2025, the Eid celebration held in Croke Park, the GAA stadium, was met with protests. The far-right page The Irish Inquiry had a video titled "Discrimination Against Us as Irish Christians at Croke Park Muslim Event?" after its members were removed for filming inside the venue.[19] In the comments on their Facebook page, Muslims were accused of not integrating, and some argued that this event should not happen in a Christian country and on "sacred ground."[20] Croke Park was framed as sacred in reference to Bloody Sunday during the Irish War of Independence, when the Royal Irish Constabulary fired into the crowd during a Gaelic football match. The idea that Ireland is a Christian country creates a clear boundary and positions Muslims as an Other to the Irish Christian. But it is not just a question of boundaries; integration also raises questions about the internal body.

The difficulty with the right's approach to the social body is not simply about the container mentality; it is also about how the body is envisioned internally. The difficulty is that integration can result in treating the body more like a machine because there is the desire for coherence and organisation. The different parts of the body are expected to work together in a harmonious way. Rachel Muers writes that a mechanical view of the body means: "Each part of the machine does a job, and does it well, and is linked up to all the other parts in a way that's consistent and predictable and can be specified, and thus the body keeps going and achieves what it has to achieve."[21] But Muers, reflecting on her experience of pregnancy, found her body to be "unpredictable" and even in conflict

[18] Susannah Ticciati, "Reconceiving the Boundaries of Home: The 'Oikology' of Ephesians," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21, no. 4 (2019): 413–14, https://doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12384.

[19] The Irish Inquiry, "Discrimination Against Us as Irish Christians at Croke Park Muslim Event?" Facebook video, June 13, 2025, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1244710253953144.

[20] The Irish Inquiry, "Discrimination Against Us."

[21] Rachel Muers, "The Body is (Not Quite) One," in *Pregnancy and Birth: Critical Theological Conceptions,* ed. Karen O'Donnell and Claire Williams (London: SCM Press, 2024), 21.

with itself at times. The political body, imagined mechanically, appears to consist of different parts or cogs that complement each other and would allow for Ireland to be self-sufficient and coherent. The underlying assumption is that one cannot accept immigrants, Muslims or any other group identified as an Other, because they are not a compatible part, they will create extra strain on the body, and it will break down. It is thought that integration is not possible. But the question that emerges is whether this is the right model of political embodiment. It not only emphasises conformity and utility, but also assumes that unity must be predictable.

Reimagining the Social Body Through Disability Theology

To challenge the tacit approach to the body politic that is being put forward, disability theology offers resources that bring renewed attention to human embodiment. Disability is a term that covers a wide variety of experiences, but disability offers a lens to critically engage with normative values that shape assumptions about embodiment and cognition. Disability theologians have repeatedly written about how disability helps to emphasise the centrality of limits, vulnerability, and interdependence. While these qualities are not unique to people with disabilities, non-disabled people are less likely to be aware of their limits. It is often remarked that should one live long enough, one will eventually become disabled.[22] Deborah Creamer has argued that there is a need for an anthropology of limits as it helps to overcome the binary between disabled people and non-disabled people. This is not an attempt to treat everyone as being the same, but rather to recognise what is shared. Human vulnerability and limits are universal, and yet at the same time, they are contextual and fluid. One of the central aspects of Creamer's argument is that limits should not be understood as a lack or a deficit, which is how the medical model identifies disability. Instead, she argues that limits can be thought of as good, or at the very least, as not evil. This is not saying that limits are to be accepted passively; rather, it involves thinking about how to adapt to those limits.

It is difficult to claim that one's limits can be embraced, particularly when moving from individual bodies to social bodies. The desire to make society more effective and orderly is not wrong, since many social ills are the result of institutions failing to help those who rely on them. At the same time, one cannot allow the need for efficiency to obfuscate the reality that there will always be limits. Creamer argues that instead of rejecting and fearing limits, one should focus on what one can do with one's limits. It is necessary to recognise that this is true not only of individuals, but also of the social body. The etymology of vulnerability comes from the Latin to harm or injure, which helps to explain why it is often feared and rejected. Yet there is a risk in rejecting vulnerability: one may end up rejecting others and, in doing so, dehumanising them. This is evident in attitudes

[22] Deborah Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 96.

towards disability, where fear of suffering and dependence can result in disabled people being seen only as objects of pity and charity. Such perceptions reinforce dehumanisation, rather than recognising that limits and interdependence are a normal part of human life.[23] The question, then, is whether the limits of a social body will lead to the insistence that the social body is a container that must be sealed or whether limits can instead be recognised as conditions that require creative adaptation. Disability is a reminder that the political body, just like bodies in general, is not a machine. To expect perfect parts is to expect uniformity and to treat difference only as something that complements the whole. Each cog is expected to fit into the overall machine. In 1 Corinthians 12:12–30, Paul describes the body as having many parts, with each part contributing its own gift. It is often said that immigrants contribute to their new country, but even this well-meaning rhetoric can reinforce a mechanical view of the body, placing the emphasis on conformity and productivity rather than inherent dignity and relationality. This is not a denial of the gifts of immigration, but to move away from the mechanical understanding of the body politic, it needs to be understood that caring for the body is not always seamless or easy. Disability can involve challenging bodily experience: meltdowns, fatigue, seizures, or chronic pain. For those who are not living with such realities, these experiences can feel awkward, particularly when one does not know how to offer support. The social body, however, cannot avoid attending to its messiness. This is not only relevant for those who become part of the body—for example, refugees who are traumatised—but also for those who are already within it. Lennard Davis points out how sign language has been oppressed because it is seen as isolating deaf people from the rest of the community.[24] Another way of framing it is that they are a section of society that does not conform to the main language of a country. Moreover, to focus on what a person can do risks making membership of a community conditional on their productivity, on what they add to that community, rather than on their inherent dignity and relationality.

One of the points emphasised by many disability theologians is that health should not be equated with a high-functioning body. If health is understood as the absence of illness or suffering, this overlooks other aspects of wellbeing, particularly the centrality of relationships. Relationships are a vital aspect of community and of bodies. The danger is that the focus narrows to the boundaries of Irish identity and how society can change, preventing transformation and relational engagement. There is the problem of treating Irish culture as static and performative. It does not acknowledge that Irish culture is constantly being shaped and reshaped. As Rowan Williams wrote, there is often an:

[23] See Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 108–9.

[24] Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), 83.

> …assumption that a culture is both fixed and impermeable. When we encounter a cultural "other," our first reaction may well be the recognition of sheer difference; and this may lead us to exaggerate the degree to which we think of that other as enclosed in itself. It is the way it is, with no reference to the way things are with me or with us… the natural reaction is to see the object as self-contained, on the other side of a barrier.[25]

The body is porous and will change through its relationships. Rather than attempting to keep the body self-contained, there is a need to recognise that it cannot avoid relation—humans are relational beings—and therefore the body cannot avoid change.

Conclusion

To conclude, the issue of immigration reveals how the Catholic right implicitly understands the body metaphor. By arguing for strict boundaries and for the internal workings to complement each other, it is putting forward an understanding of the communal body that is rigid and mechanical rather than as something that is organic and relational. This emphasis on strength and boundaries leads to a fear of vulnerability. A disability hermeneutic, however, invites reconsideration of this fear, framing it as an inherent part of human nature. It shifts the focus away from the ideal of a perfect, harmonious body toward one that acknowledges mutual vulnerability and how to best adapt to these limits. Furthermore, disability reminds one that the body is awkward and messy, and that attending to this reality will not always have a clear benefit. Finally, there is a need to have an idea of a nation's health that recognises the importance of relationship and therefore, the body is constantly reshaped through these relationships.

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[25] Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 101.

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"WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?"

HUMAN DIGNITY AND SMALL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

This chapter examines the relationship between human dignity and small communities, arguing that the practical recognition of dignity is fundamentally shaped through interpersonal relationships within local contexts such as neighbourhoods and churches. Responding to Pope Francis's call for a contextual theology attentive to the lived realities of vulnerable persons, the study explores how recognition within communities influences self-respect and the perception of human worth. Drawing on the theories of Charles Taylor, Jeremy Waldron, Jürgen Habermas, and Paul Ricoeur, the article develops an interdisciplinary theological and philosophical account of dignity. It traces the historical democratization of dignity from a status reserved for social elites to a universal human attribute while emphasizing that legal recognition alone remains insufficient without concrete social mediation. The analysis argues that small communities provide the relational framework in which dignity is experienced through mutual recognition, solidarity, and responsibility for others. Pope Francis's reflections, particularly in *Fratelli tutti*, are presented as a theological vision of neighbourly relationships that restore and strengthen human dignity through shared commitment to the common good. The chapter concludes that cultivating hospitable local communities is essential for translating universal principles of human dignity into lived social practice, especially for individuals and groups experiencing vulnerability, exclusion, or marginalization.[1]

Keywords: Human dignity; small communities; recognition; vulnerability; neighbour; Pope Francis.

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This chapter is written in response to Pope Francis's call for "a fundamentally contextual theology, capable of reading and interpreting the Gospel in the conditions in which men and women daily live, in different geographical, social and cultural environments."[2] Here, I would like to explore the relationship between human dignity and small communities. Considering the pope's appeal to have in mind "the conditions in which men and women daily live," I am referring to different vulnerable individuals and groups in difficult life situations caused by health, age, economic circumstances, mental and social disabilities, including migrants.[3] Due to their social isolation and exclusion, the dignity of these persons is often denied in practice, even though it is usually recognized in theory. In dialogue with several contemporary thinkers, I will ask how a more precise understanding of the nature of dignity could promote recognition of vulnerable people in our communities, whether in the parish, neighbourhood, and beyond.

The thesis being argued is that the shaping of one's own perception of human dignity happens through recognition within small human communities such as neighbourhoods or churches. This is an elaboration of the idea which Charles Taylor formulated with regard to the link between recognition and identity. He says:

> Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of persons can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.[4]

I expand and narrow Taylor's concept. While he focuses primarily on the cultural identity of minorities, I speak more broadly about self-respect and appreciation of one's own dignity. Instead of the general "people or society around," I emphasize the role of specific local communities. Communities have a constitutive influence on, what we might call a "practical understanding" of human dignity. In small communities, recognition of human dignity is not primarily driven by the value of a person's utility, but by their place in the community. With Taylor, it

[2] Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam*: Apostolic Letter Issued *Motu Proprio* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), no. 4, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html; English trans. Christopher E. Longhurst, "*Ad Theologiam Promovendam* (On Promoting Theology)," unofficial translation.

[3] Of course, I work with my mental image of these people, which is shaped by my limited experience and contact with the education of social work professionals. Conceptual reflection on human dignity would be aided by practical research, which, however, goes beyond the scope of this work.

[4] Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition,"* ed. Charles Taylor and Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 25–73, 25, emphasis in original.

should be added that "due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need."[5]

This idea corresponds with the claim articulated in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which states that: "Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible."[6] Community is conceived as an essential prerequisite for human development.[7] While the Declaration emphasizes duties towards the community, Pope Francis expressed a similar idea from the perspective of the community itself when he wrote in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*: "As a community, we have an obligation to ensure that every person lives with dignity and has sufficient opportunities for his or her integral development."[8] Francis's shift in emphasis to human communities accepting responsibility "beyond a world of 'associates,'"[9] that is, toward any vulnerable people with whom they may come into contact, is important to my argument. The question is, however, how to imagine this "neighbourhood anthropology" and how it can be conceived to practically support the recognition of human dignity.

Democratization of Dignity

The idea of dignity that I drew on comes from the studies by Jeremy Waldron and Jürgen Habermas. Waldron associates dignity with office and rank, which in history expressed hierarchical differentiation of status and as such was intrinsically linked to inequalities. If dignity was granted to some, it could not be extended to the majority of others. Today, however, dignity "conveys the idea that all human persons belong to the same rank and that that rank is a very high one indeed."[10] Dignity expresses a set of specific expectations associated with status and a standard of behaviour appropriate to the fact that we are dealing with a person who has

[5] Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," 26.

[6] United Nations General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, adopted December 10, 1948, UN General Assembly Resolution 217 A (III), art. 29.

[7] The formulation bears the traces of Aristotle's approach expressed in his *Politics*, where the highest good in which we participate is linked to the development of the *polis*. For a theological reflection on the political dimension of human beings, see Petr Jandejsek, "The Human Being and the *Polis*," in *Who is Human Being? An Ecumenical Approach to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Ivana Noble and Zdenko Širka (Leiden: Brill, 2026), 321–44.

[8] Francis, *Fratelli tutti*: Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), no. 118, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

[9] Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 101.

[10] Jeremy Waldron, "Dignity and Rank: In Memory of Gregory Vlastos (1907–1991)," *European Journal of Sociology* 48, no. 2 (2007): 201, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975607000343.

this status. He says: "Dignity is a status that comprises a given set of rights."[11] There has been a radical move in history, thanks to the treatment previously reserved for people of high status, now being extended to all sectors of the population.[12] However, this was not a simple reversal of power. Instead of simply reversing the direction of the relations of dominion and subordination associated with rank, there was an expansion of the holders of dignity.[13] A demand for respect has been transferred from nobility to every last ordinary person. Waldron does not elaborate on how the universalization and egalitarianization of high status came about historically, although he does mention the contributions of John Locke and Catholic thinkers. However, he points out that if the idea of dignity is to have any meaning today, it must retain a certain resonance with its once privileged aristocratic usage, including its fine distinctions.

Jürgen Habermas quotes Waldron approvingly. He revisits the question that Waldron left open, namely the historical beginnings of this idea that all human beings have equal dignity. Habermas believes that two critical steps contributed to this development. The first was individualization. He says: "The issue is the *worth of the individual* in the horizontal relations between different human beings, not the status of 'human beings' in the vertical relation to God or to 'lower' creatures on the evolutionary scale."[14] The second step was to emphasize the absolute worth of any person. "The issue is the *unique worth* of each person."[15] Both steps took place in European philosophy inspired by the Judeo-Christian tradition. It was not the Stoic definition of the collective notion of *dignitas humana* explaining the distinguished ontological status of human beings in the cosmos, but rather medieval discussions about the creation of humans in God's likeness

[11] Jeremy Waldron, "Is Dignity the Foundation of Human Rights?" *New York University School of Law Public Law & Legal Theory Research Paper Series*, Working Paper no. 12–73 (January 2013): 25.

[12] Similarly, Charles Taylor argues that in modern horizontal society, "each of us is equidistant from the centre, we are immediate to the whole." Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 209. The rejection of the previous hierarchical order implies a requirement to secure to all participants equality in freedom and mutual benefit (see Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171).

[13] Waldron shows that a legitimate demand for the removal of the stratification system can be made in two ways: "We might say that no one is entitled to the sort of respect that nobles have been claiming. Or (2) we might say that everyone is entitled to the sort of respect that nobles have been claiming." Waldron, "Dignity and Rank," 224. An example of the first approach is Czechoslovakia, which immediately after its establishment in 1918, in one of its first legal acts, abolished the use of aristocratic titles and orders, as well as all rights arising from them. A second example would perhaps be the wording of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

[14] Jürgen Habermas, "The Concept of Human Dignity and the Realistic Utopia of Human Rights,"
Metaphilosophy 41, no. 4 (July 2010): 473–74 (emphasis in original), https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9973.2010.01648.x.

[15] Habermas, "The Concept of Human Dignity," 474.

and the reminder of the Last Judgment, before which everyone will stand alone. This led to a relativization of the relationship between a person's uniqueness and their social roles.

In hierarchically ordered traditional societies, status-dependent dignities were linked to a corporative ethos. According to Habermas, some form of social recognition remains constitutive even for today's universalized dignity. He argues that "human dignity also requires anchoring in a social status, that is, membership in an organized community in space and time."[16] For him, the community that would fulfil the condition of ensuring equal status—and thus dignity—for all is a constitutionally based political community. This cannot stop at the borders of nation states. That is why Habermas comes up with the idea of a constitutionalized world society. With good reason he proposes global society as an appropriate framework for a community organized in space and time.[17] Yet, it is apparent that the broad fundamental platform for the recognition of human dignity needs to be mediated. This mediation is facilitated by civil society organizations. As suggested above, it is at the level of small communities that one can actually experience recognition and the dignified life that flows from it.

The Role of Communities Revisited

Perception of the role of communities is not without ambiguity. Charles Taylor notes the impression of many people in Western societies who believe that communities such as families, neighbourhoods, and churches are being disrupted: "They sense that people are less willing to participate, to do their bit; and they are less trusting of others."[18] Breaking free from the restrictive pressure of these structures is even considered a kind of liberation. Taylor sums up the prevailing approach with the term "age of authenticity."[19] The pursuit of personal happiness is generally becoming the guiding principle of life.

Although close relationships and communities can sometimes contribute to a person's pursuit of happiness, this does not alter the fundamental situation that "we can flourish only to the extent that we are recognized."[20] Both Habermas and Taylor consider some form of community to be a prerequisite for a dignified life. Habermas refers to a political community based on a constitution. Taylor refers to a community of free individuals who share values of respect and service and

[16] Habermas, "The Concept of Human Dignity," 472.

[17] See Habermas, "The Concept of Human Dignity," 475. In a way, this extensive proposal was echoed in *Fratelli tutti*: "No one, then, can remain excluded because of his or her place of birth, much less because of privileges enjoyed by others who were born in lands of greater opportunity. The limits and borders of individual states cannot stand in the way of this." Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 121.

[18] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473.

[19] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 475.

[20] Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," 50.

gather for joint action. However, the perspective of both authors remains somewhat distant from the level of interpersonal relationships in which we ultimately acknowledge each other's human dignity. It is a level at which, in the words of Francis, we become neighbours. Outside this level, we may be left with a disembodied and decontextualized notion of dignity, merely translatable to the level of morality and law. Before returning to Pope Francis, I would first like to introduce this level through Paul Ricoeur.[21]

In his exposition of personal and collective memory, Ricoeur introduces yet another perspective, "an intermediate level of reference."[22] He describes it as "the level of our close relations … these people who count for us and for whom we count … situated along a range of varying distances in the relation between self and others."[23] The French author does not speak of dignity directly, but its recognition can be easily imagined in what he describes as "the interplay of distantiation and closeness that makes proximity a dynamic relationship ceaselessly in motion."[24] Dignity can be recognized in practice precisely at this level of proximity, i.e., in the middle ground between Taylor's individual pursuit of happiness and Habermas's constitutional state. Ricoeur states that mutual recognition (of dignity, we might add) takes place between those "who approve of my existence and whose existence I approve of in a spirit of mutuality and equal respect."[25] And he continues, "What I expect from my close relations is that they approve of what I attest: that I am able to speak, act, recount, impute to myself the responsibility for my actions."[26] Are these not precisely the predicates of human dignity that Waldron spoke of?

Pope Francis points out that dignity is both given and received. And this is conceivable at the parish or neighbourhood level. Francis says, "Jesus … encourages us … to restore dignity to the suffering,"[27] and elsewhere, "we should … be changed by our contact with human suffering. That is the meaning of dignity."[28] By engaging with others who are in need, their dignity can be strengthened, but at the same time, our existing approach to dignity undergoes a transformation.

When Francis further states: "If every human being possesses an inalienable dignity, if all people are my brothers and sisters …"[29] following Waldron, we can

[21] Interestingly, Francis himself draws on Ricoeur's early analysis of the neighbour. See Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, nos. 102 and 164. See Amy Daughton, "Paul Ricoeur and *Fratelli tutti*: Neighbor, People, Institution," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 19, no. 1 (2022): 71–88, https://doi.org/10.5840/jcathsoc20221916.

[22] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 131.

[23] Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 131.

[24] Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 131.

[25] Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 132.

[26] Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 132.

[27] Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 71.

[28] Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 68.

[29] Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 125.

paraphrase this as follows: if we grant others, e.g., foreigners, the status of brothers and sisters, we thereby recognize their human dignity and all that it implies. An example of this behaviour for the pope is the Johannine community, in which Christians were to be welcomed "even if they are strangers" (3 Jn 5).[30] Moreover, commenting on the parable of the Good Samaritan, the pope beautifully captures, in Ricoeur's style, the relationship between community and dignity. He writes: "The parable shows us how a community can be rebuilt by men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others, who reject the creation of a society of exclusion, and act instead as neighbours, lifting up and rehabilitating the fallen for the sake of the common good."[31]

For the sake of the common good—according to Taylor, it is a key aspect of any hospitable community. Although such a community will be based on the values of the liberal tradition, which are enjoyed by all without distinction, a hospitable community must also "be organized around a definition of the good life, without this being seen as a depreciation of those who do not personally share this definition."[32] The point is that it is not enough to simply leave space for everyone to freely express themselves. According to Taylor, it is necessary to consciously cultivate a certain idea of the good life. This then gives rise to relationships where, as Ricoeur says, others approve of my existence and whose existence I approve of, or—in the words of Francis—a model of culture developed according to the parable of the Good Samaritan.

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[30] Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 62.
[31] Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 67.
[32] Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," 59.

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CONTEXTUAL REALITIES IN THE ARTICULATION OF A NEW THEOLOGY OF SEX AND SIN

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Abstract

This chapter welcomes *Ad theologiam promovendam*'s call for an interdisciplinary contextual theology that is attentive to concrete empirical realities. I argue that the Catholic Church is well positioned to dialogue with secular realities and articulate an ethical framework in service to the common good. The Church's postsecular capacity is evident in its discourse on climate change, especially *Laudato si'*, where it deploys varied, culturally accessible forms of reasoning and effectively translates its faith-grounded beliefs. Church dialogue with the increasingly secularized, lived realities of Catholics' sexual and family relationships is more challenging. The chapter highlights Vatican recognition of the cultural limitations in natural law reasoning and, as acknowledged by Pope Benedict XVI and elaborated by the Synod on the Family, its lack of attunement with contemporary Catholics. I suggest that the task of crafting a new theology of sex and sin is well suited to the interdisciplinary collaboration envisioned in *Ad theologiam promovendam*.

Keywords: Contextual theology; postsecularism; natural law; sexual ethics; synodality; doctrinal development.

Ad theologiam promovendam (ATP) is another welcome proclamation from the Vatican adding to its increased prioritization of a Church that seeks to proactively engage with contextual realities.[1] It calls for a paradigm shift that commits to a "fundamentally contextual theology" (ATP 4). It elaborates:

> Without opposing theory and practice, theological reflection is urged to *develop with an inductive method*, which starts from the

[1] Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html.

> contexts and concrete situations in which peoples are inserted, allowing themselves to be seriously challenged by reality, to become discernment of the "signs of the times" … Therefore, it is necessary first of all to give priority *to the knowledge of the common sense of the people* who are in fact a theological place in which so many images of God dwell (ATP 8; emphasis in original).

A strong emphasis on the significance of lived realities to the ongoing development of Catholic doctrine was a defining feature of Francis's papacy. This ethos, as I've demonstrated elsewhere,[2] positions the Church well to meet the expectations of postsecular society. The term "postsecular," introduced by the German social theorist Jürgen Habermas,[3] captures the co-occurrence of the fact that Western countries are by and large well-settled secular societies and, at the same time, religion still matters in individual lives, in inter-institutional relations, and in public culture. The persistence of religion is, in part, a reflection of the unevenness and limits of modernity. Despite the institutionalization of reason and rationality and the ever-more visibly impactful achievements of scientific and technological progress, modernity has not managed to eradicate societal ills (e.g., socio-economic inequality, global warming) nor existential longings. Therefore, although Habermas had for decades dismissed the relevance of religion as a resource in advancing reasoned public discourse,[4] the turn of the century saw him looking to probe how mutual dialogue between the religious and the secular might reorient modernity toward achieving its emancipatory goals (e.g., greater equality and social and political participation). He thus conceded that a contrite modernity might benefit from dialogical engagement with religious-derived norms and ethical intuitions.[5]

Amid significant declines in Catholic affiliation and practice[6] and the still-reverberating negative impact of the clerical sex abuse crisis on the Church's credibility, postsecular awareness offers the Church new opportunities to be relevant in helping steer the course of individual lives as well as secular society at large.

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[2] Michele Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism: Relevance and Renewal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[3] Jürgen Habermas, "Notes on Post-Secular Society," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25 (2008): 17–29.

[4] Michele Dillon, "The Authority of the Holy Revisited: Habermas, Religion, and Emancipatory Possibilities," *Sociological Theory* 17 (1999): 290–306.

[5] Virgil Nemoianu, "The Church and the Secular Establishment: A Philosophical Dialog between Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 9, no. 2 (2006): 16–42, https://doi.org/10.1353/log.2006.0019.

[6] E.g., Pew Research Center, *Religion in Latin America* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2014); Pew Research Center, *Being Christian in Western Europe* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2018); Pew Research Center, *47% of U.S. Adults Have a Personal or Family Connection to Catholicism* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2025).

The postsecular recognition of the mutual relevance of the religious and the secular opens up new lines of dialogue, and thus of action, both within the Church and for its role in secular society.[7] The postsecular turn also comes with challenges, however. Postsecular expectations emphasize the importance of a reflexive openness to context; the need for awareness of history and contingency in understanding institutional structures and traditions; and for mutual respectful dialogue between religious and secular citizens, for religious leaders, for example, to talk *with* rather than about secular currents. Further, postsecular awareness, while respecting the enduring value of faith-grounded ethics, traditions, and doctrines, nonetheless requires the translation of these teachings and practices into a well-reasoned, culturally accessible discourse in order for these ideas to have resonance among largely secular audiences and interlocutors.[8]

Successive popes since John XXIII have highlighted the critical challenge for the Church in seeking to have relevance and authority amid the currents of an accelerating and expansive secularism. At times, as with Pope John Paul II, this has led to unambiguous denunciation of secular society.[9] Francis, by contrast, conveyed a strong postsecular sensibility, demonstrating openness to and engagement with secular currents.[10] His worldview, clearly enunciated from the outset of his papacy, was that "God is to be encountered in the world of today."

> God is in history [and] in [its] processes … God is certainly in the past, because we can see his footprints. And God is also in the future as a promise. But the "concrete" God, so to speak, is today. For this reason, complaining never helps us find God. The complaints of today about how barbaric the world is—these complaints sometimes end up giving birth within the church to desires to establish order in the sense of pure conservation, as a defense. No: God is to be encountered in the world of today.[11]

[7] Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*. See also Michele Dillon, "Climate Change and the Common Good: The Catholic Church's Postsecular Relevance," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 22 (2025): 263–85.

[8] Habermas, "Notes on Post-Secular Society." See also Jürgen Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (London: Polity, 2010). Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*.

[9] John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html.

[10] Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*.

[11] Francis, "A Big Heart Open to God: The Exclusive Interview with Pope Francis," interview by Antonio Spadaro, SJ, *America*, September 30, 2013, https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis/.

Francis frequently articulated this perspective, reminding Catholics and others that God is present in "everyday affairs" and "concrete activities." This understanding—the presence of God in the everyday world—is embedded, of course, in core principles of Catholic theology: incarnation and immanence. They are at the heart of the Catholic imagination which, as Andrew Greeley elaborates,[12] sees God and other elements of the Catholic faith (e.g., Jesus, Mary, the Trinity) "lurking in the [ordinary everyday] objects, events and people of creation." Yet at the macro level, Church leaders have often looked defensively at secular forces.[13]

Francis reclaimed the Church's understanding of secular society as an immersive domain for the Church—God is in it!—and not merely an object of criticism. As he acknowledged in *Amoris laetitia* (AL): "We have often been on the defensive, wasting pastoral energy on denouncing a decadent world without being proactive in proposing ways of finding true happiness …[14] We should not be trapped into wasting energy in doleful laments" (AL 57).

For Francis, a way out of this trap is for the Church to foster an institutional culture of ongoing dialogue between doctrinal ideas and secular realities.[15] He frequently reiterated the principle that "realities are greater than ideas," and relatedly, that ideas and realities must be in continuous dialogue.[16] A key mechanism for this dialogue was Francis's deployment of laity-centred synods. Formally instituted by Pope Paul VI in 1965, synods are purposively intended to help the Church "carefully survey the signs of the times and … [facilitate] the effort to adapt … to changing circumstances and need of our day."[17] There have been several synods since Vatican II—thirteen before Francis became pope. However, synods achieved impressive public prominence and vitality during Francis's tenure largely because he convened synods on topics that are of deep significance to ordinary Catholics: the *Synod on the Family* (2014–15), the *Synod on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment* (October 2018), and the *Synod on Syn-*

[12] Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 77.

[13] E.g., John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*.

[14] Francis, *Amoris laetitia* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), no. 38, https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.

[15] Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

[16] Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, nos. 231–233.

[17] Paul VI, *Apostolica sollicitudo* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19650915_apostolica-sollicitudo.html.

odality (2022–24), as well as a regional synod for the Pan-Amazon region (October 2019). Further, he extended synodal processes in ways that directly engage with the everyday contexts of Catholics' lives.[18]

Openness to Concrete Realities: Climate Change

The contemporary Church's engagement with concrete realities is well demonstrated in its tackling of the global problem of climate change.[19] Ecological destruction has long been a concern of the Church, dating back to Paul VI's papacy. And Benedict, notably, was known as the "green pope." Francis further elevated and amplified the issue with his encyclical on care for our common home, *Laudato si'*,[20] and the successor document, *Laudate Deum*.[21] His interventions received extensive worldwide notice among political elites and ordinary people alike. His moral influence is credited with helping push approval of the Paris Climate Agreement (December 2015), committing 195 countries, including the Holy See, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Importantly, too, the longstanding work of Catholic Climate Covenant, an environmental advocacy organization established in 2006 and composed of several Catholic partner organizations, as well as other advocacy organizations and local grassroots chapters who are part of the cross-national *Laudato si'* (Climate Change) Movement, was—and is—further energized by the Vatican's prioritization of climate change. Ecological health is also an evident commitment for Pope Leo XIV; in the first months of his papacy, he celebrated the first Mass for the Care of Creation and also inaugurated Borgo *Laudato si'* at Castel Gandolfo, among other actions.[22]

Laudato si' exemplifies the Church's postsecular capacity both by its focus on an issue that is of urgent concern to wide-ranging religious and secular audiences,[23] and in its translation of faith-based ideas and beliefs into a culturally accessible discourse. Elsewhere,[24] I have documented the varied ways in which

[18] Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*. See also Michele Dillon, "Can Synodality Ferment an Inclusive Catholicism?" *Journal of Law and Religion* (2024): 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1017/jlr.2024.14.

[19] Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*. See also Dillon, "Climate Change and the Common Good."

[20] Francis, *Laudato si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

[21] Francis, *Laudate Deum* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html.

[22] Dillon, "Climate Change and the Common Good."

[23] See, e.g., European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer 565: Climate Change* (Brussels: European Commission, June 2025), https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3472. See also Pew Research Center, *Climate Change Remains Top Global Threat Across 19-Country Survey* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2022).

[24] Dillon, "Climate Change and the Common Good."

the Vatican accomplishes this translation: its use of specific faith-based as well as trans-denominational religious themes; the primacy of culturally accessible principles such as transgenerational solidarity and integral ecology; scientific studies; poetic and literary motifs; and engagement with a broad range of religious and secular sources of authoritative knowledge.[25]

Natural Law and Catholics' Sexual Relationships

In contrast to the contextual salience of the Vatican's reasoning on climate change, it finds it difficult to articulate an accessible discourse on sexual behavior, a topic of everyday significance to *many* Catholics (and others).[26] Church teaching on sex, sexuality, and sexual behaviour is complex. In general terms, its approach to sexual morality is grounded in natural law, which argues that ethics and moral principles derive from, are inherent in, and are discerned through "natural" human reason. Natural law, as Benedict explains, is "a common law that precedes dogma . . . [its principles are derived] from nature, from man's reason."[27] Thus, natural law understands certain things, by nature, to be inherently and objectively good in and of themselves—for example, human life, everyday practical reason, the beauty of art and nature, and what the Church sees as the natural structure of human sexual differences and female–male complementarity. With this understanding, therefore, the Church claims sexual behaviour as not solely a religious or a faith-based matter but, more so, one of universal, fundamental morality. Sexual morality thus assumes moral and sociopolitical significance beyond Catholicism.

From a postsecular perspective, the Church's adherence to natural law is interesting because, in principle, it is a trans-religious moral framework. As Benedict elaborated:

> Natural law—especially in the Catholic Church—remains the topos [the typical frame] with which the Church, in conversations with secular society as well as with other communities of faith, appeals to a shared reason and searches for the foundations of a communication about the ethical principles of the law in a secular, pluralistic society.[28]

[25] Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*. See also Dillon, "Climate Change and the Common Good."

[26] Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*.

[27] Benedict XVI, "Prepolitical Moral Foundations of a Free Republic," in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 265.

[28] Benedict XVI, "Prepolitical Moral Foundations of a Free Republic," 265.

The Church's self-understanding is that it has an institutional obligation to articulate not a specifically Catholic but an impartial, secular morality. Its (self-defined) task is to articulate an objectively reasoned *public* morality. This is so, notwithstanding the differentiation of church and state—and the differentiation of religious morality and civil law—at the core of political liberalism and as affirmed by the Church itself at Vatican II. Because natural law is, in principle, a universally accessible discourse, the Church's embrace of natural law positions it well, theoretically, as a postsecular actor with access to a culturally accessible idiom.[29] In practice, however, the Church struggles to translate its natural law reasoning into either arguments or a vocabulary that has cultural resonance.

The Synod on the Family: Problematizing Natural Law

The Synod on the Family (2014–2015) stands out for its extensive immersion in the wide-ranging diversity of Catholics' sexual relationships and marriage and family situations. As elaborated elsewhere,[30] the synod's goal was not to denounce the "irregularity" of so many Catholics' sexual and cohabiting practices but, instead, to proactively respond to the pastoral challenges Catholics encounter in their actual personal and family circumstances. Rather than privileging Church teachings on the family over the realities of family life, and rather than relying on priests' and bishops' assessments of family life in their dioceses/parishes, the synod looked to hear the experience-based accounts of people themselves from within their sexual and socio-emotional roles as spouses, partners, and parents. Quite remarkably, the Vatican's unprecedented dive into the intimate decisions and experiences of the laity resulted, by June 2014, in the submission of questionnaire responses from Catholics within approximately 90 percent of the world's bishops' conferences and an additional approximately 800 Catholic organizations.

The large body of data collected, summarized by the Synod Secretariat (in an *instrumentum laboris*, or pre-synod working document), further underscored the empirically well-documented gap between official Church teaching and Catholics' behaviour and attitudes. Much of the data pointed, as the bishops of England and Wales noted, to Catholics' experiences of the Church as "being out of touch, unbending or unrealistic" regarding sexual ethics, same-sex relationships, and contraception.[31] Although the data gathered were more confirmatory than revelatory, the groundbreaking significance of the exercise cannot be overstated. For the first time in history, Church officials were publicly probing questions about Catholic phenomena that they previously had either marginalized or framed as contradictory of Catholicism. The Vatican's exercise publicly named the long-existing realities of divorced and remarried Catholics and LGBT+ Catholics,

[29] Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*.
[30] Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*.
[31] Quoted in Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*, 131.

among others, and gave voice to these Catholics' longings for full integration into the Catholic community. As such, the synod literally blew open a prolonged social and theological conversation about the normality of these diverse Catholic realities and their significance to a Church that seeks to be inclusive (catholic) and relevant. Importantly, too, given that Catholic doctrinal development is an accumulative reflexive process, this dynamic conversation and its grappling with lived Catholic realities is ongoing.

In the spirit of Francis's emphasis on necessary dialogue between ideas and realities, the synod's convening suggested that natural law might need to be bracketed while the diverse realities of Catholics' relationships and families are reckoned with. Among an array of wide-ranging questions, the synod's pre-synodal questionnaire inquired into Catholics' expectations of the sacraments, and how they regard the separate contributions of scripture, the magisterium, and natural law in the Church's teaching. Further, it asked about how natural law is received among non-practicing Catholics and nonbelievers, as well as in civil society and the culture at large.

Responding to the data, U.S. bishops' conference chairman Archbishop Kurtz said the findings highlighted the "need for greater, effective teaching on key tenets of the faith, such as the indissolubility of marriage, the importance of sexual difference for marriage, the natural law, and the married couple's call to be open to life." The 2014 *Instrumentum laboris* took a more conciliatory stance, noting that the language of natural law requires a more meaningful and accessible translation.[32] Given the centrality of natural law in Catholic teaching, this was a startling recognition, yet not a first for the Vatican. Notably, Benedict had previously commented on the communicative limits of natural law, observing that natural law as an "instrument has unfortunately become dull."[33] The same reasons Benedict identified for its limitations were echoed in the 2014 *Instrumentum laboris*.[34] The inaccessibility of natural law, the Vatican suggested, is partly due to the complexity of its reasoning. It also noted its tendency to be misunderstood and, indeed, to be conflated with its inverse (e.g., natural spontaneity), as well as its perceived incompatibility with new scientific theories (e.g., evolutionary biology). As elaborated in the 2014 *Instrumentum laboris*:

> Very few responses and observations demonstrated an adequate, popular understanding of the natural law. [§ 21] . . . The responses and observations also show that the adjective natural often is un-

[32] Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum laboris: The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014), nos. 20–27, 30, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20140626_instrumentum-laboris-familia_en.html.

[33] Benedict XVI, "Prepolitical Moral Foundations of a Free Republic," 265.

[34] Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum laboris*, no. 22.

> derstood by people as meaning "spontaneous" or "what comes naturally." Today people tend to place a high value on personal feelings and emotions, aspects that appear "genuine" and "fundamental" and therefore to be followed "simply according to one's nature … in not only the West but increasingly every part of the world, scientific research poses a serious challenge to the concept of nature. Evolution, biology and neuroscience, when confronted with the traditional idea of the natural law, conclude that it is not "scientific."[35]

In what might be considered a postsecular concession to the Vatican's assessment that "natural law is perceived as an outdated legacy,"[36] Church officials called for "a renewal of language."[37] Such strategic moves recognize that for arguments to be persuasive, they need to be translated into an everyday idiom that makes sense to ordinary individuals. In the Vatican's view, it is not that a particular truth necessarily lacks authority but, rather, the language in which it is framed. Thus, the Vatican argued: "The language traditionally used in explaining the term 'natural law' should be improved so that the values of the Gospel can be communicated to people today in a more intelligible manner."[38] It further affirmed that in working toward a "rereading of the concept of the natural law in a more meaningful manner in today's world," the language should be "accessible to all."[39]

Despite the synod's aspiration for a rereading or reframing of natural law, its subsequent deliberations and recommendations did not quite meet the mark. There were, however, important linguistic and symbolic gains. Notably, the term natural law is not mentioned in any of the official synod reports, a clear departure from previous iterations of Catholic teaching on sexuality, marriage, and family. Further, while the synod's concluding report largely reaffirmed Church teaching on homosexuality, it avoided the language of sexual disorder, a small but significant symbolic step. Thus the final report did not explicitly reiterate the Vatican's previous phrasing that homosexuality is an "objectively disordered" orientation, and that homosexual acts contravene natural law.[40]

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[35] Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum laboris*, no. 22.
[36] Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum laboris*, no. 22.
[37] Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum laboris*, no. 30.
[38] Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum laboris*, no. 30.
[39] Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum laboris*, no. 30.
[40] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona humana: Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1975), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19751229_persona-humana_en.html. See also Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1986), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html; Congregation for the

A New Theology of Sex and Sin

The nuanced doctrinal momentum achieved by the Synod on the Family regarding Catholics' sexual realities is significant. The public doctrinal framing of and discourse around sexual behavior has been substantively changed by the synod's deliberations. The data-informed discussions of the diversity of Catholics' sexual and familial relationships that dominated the synodal meetings, especially evident in the participating bishops' back-and-forth discussions in their shared-language groups,[41] provide a public archival record of the Church's formal recognition that Catholics' sexual relationships are more complex and layered than assumed in natural law. Additionally, the various affirmations offered by the post-synodal *Amoris laetitia* to divorced/remarried and gay couples, numerous other statements by Francis on gay relationships, and the Vatican's declaration approving the blessing of same-sex couples and other couples in irregular situations[42] further amplify this recognition. Most notably, statements by Cardinal McElroy in early 2023 calling for a new theology of sex and sin mark a transformative moment. He candidly argued:

> The effect of the tradition that all sexual acts outside of marriage constitute objectively grave sin has been to focus the Christian moral life disproportionately upon sexual activity … Sexual activity, while profound, does not lie at the heart of [the Church's fundamental] hierarchy [of truths]. Yet in pastoral practice we have placed it at the very center of our structures of exclusion from the Eucharist. This should change.[43]

Cardinal McElroy further elaborated that a Eucharistic theology should not be one that multiplies barriers to reception of the Eucharist based on the Church's moral teaching that any and all sexual sins (e.g., contraception, non-Church-approved marital and same-sex sexual behaviour) are objectively grave. This is

Doctrine of the Faith, *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2003), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20030731_homosexual-unions_en.html.

[41] As described in Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*.

[42] Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Fiducia supplicans: On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20231218_fiducia-supplicans_en.html.

[43] Robert W. McElroy, "Cardinal McElroy on 'Radical Inclusion' for L.G.B.T. People, Women and Others in the Catholic Church," *America*, January 24, 2023, https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2023/01/24/mcelroy-synodality-inclusion-244587.

quite a remarkable claim for a senior Church leader to articulate, and it further enriches and energizes the accumulating Catholic doctrinal discourse on sex. Sociologically, I believe, McElroy could not have called out the imperative for a new theology of sex and sin had the context for doctrinal discussion not already been set so comprehensively by the Synod on the Family, the subsequent Synod on Synodality, which focused on lay inclusivity even though sexual issues were not on its formal agenda, and more generally by the ongoing, broader openness demonstrated during Francis's papacy to secular realities, including the lived diversity and complexities of sexual relationships.

A new theology of sex and sin, one deeply grounded in the diversity of lived contexts, will require a multipronged rethinking and rewriting. The reimagining, if not the wholesale reassessment, of natural law will be central to this creative intellectual work. I'm excited that it must necessarily be an interdisciplinary endeavour and am hopeful that such engagement will result in productive transdisciplinary dialogue. As both the Second Vatican Council[44] and *Ad theologiam promovendam* affirm,[45] theological development must proceed in tandem with engagement with the empirically grounded knowledge and theoretical insights provided by the social sciences and other disciplines. The search for a well-reasoned moral framework that can speak to the diversity of Catholics' (and others') secular realities is a challenging task, to be sure, and may even seem dubious to some. Yet, if we (sociologists and theologians) in conversation with Church officials and ordinary Catholics can grasp this opportunity, I believe the endeavour and its outcomes will help revitalize contemporary Catholicism and energize its renewed moral and sacramental relevance.

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[44] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), no. 62, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

[45] Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam*, nos. 5, 6, 9.

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END-OF-LIFE CARE DECISIONS:

BRIDGING EVIDENCE-BASED BIOETHICS AND THEOLOGY

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Abstract

This chapter examines the articulation between *Evidence-Based Bioethics* (EBB) and Christian theology in contemporary bioethical reflection. Traditional bioethics, grounded in deontology, consequentialism, utilitarianism, virtue ethics, and principlism, often struggles to address the complexity, uncertainty, and singularity of clinical decision-making. EBB responds by integrating empirical evidence into ethical analysis, thereby clarifying how moral judgments are formed in healthcare contexts. The chapter proposes a three-stage methodological framework: *contextualization, decontextualization,* and *recontextualization*. Contextualization refers to the empirical study of clinical practices through EBB, identifying values, assumptions, anthropological presuppositions, and decision-making patterns embedded in real-world settings. Decontextualization consists in the theological and anthropological interpretation of these findings, whereby concepts drawn from medicine and the human sciences are critically re-examined and resignified within the horizon of faith. Recontextualization reintegrates these theological insights into ethical deliberation, generating normative orientations capable of informing clinical practice while remaining sensitive to empirical and sociocultural complexity. The dialogue between EBB and theology fosters a reflexive, integrative, and person-centered bioethics that bridges descriptive and normative dimensions of ethical reasoning.

Keywords: Evidence-Based Bioethics (EBB); Christian bioethics; theology (methods); inductive theology; end-of-life care; theological anthropology.

Introduction

The term “bioethics” refers to a body of discourse and rational practices aimed at analysing and discussing ethical issues related to human life, from conception to death, as they emerge from biomedical experimentation, clinical practice, and the

development of technoscience applied to medicine. Initially conceived as a predominantly theoretical and normative endeavour, bioethics quickly revealed its limitations when confronted with the uncertainty, complexity, and singularity of concrete situations, particularly within clinical settings. These difficulties become especially apparent in decision-making processes, where action must contend with uncertainties concerning intentions, means, risks, consequences, as well as systemic interactions and causal chains whose outcomes remain largely unpredictable.

To address these limitations, recourse to Evidence-Based Bioethics (EBB) has proved particularly relevant. Predominantly descriptive in orientation, this approach draws upon data generated through qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methodologies to describe and analyse the concepts, theories, models, practices, and decision-making contexts that are effectively at work in clinical situations.[1]

For centuries, normative ethics in the Western intellectual tradition was largely shaped by theological frameworks and presuppositions. In the twentieth century, however, the growing distance between these inherited theoretical models and casuistic models, together with the increasing complexity of clinical practice progressively limited their practical applicability. From the mid-twentieth century onward, bioethics emerged as a distinct field of inquiry at the intersection of biomedical innovation, ethical theory, and law. This shift contributed to the consolidation of bioethics as an autonomous discipline, engaged in sustained critical dialogue primarily with philosophy and law.

Within this context, the work of Hans Jonas (1903–93) occupies a decisive place. His thought marks a major turning point in contemporary bioethics by introducing a systematic reflection on responsibility towards future generations and on the long-term consequences of technoscientific development.[2] By placing at the centre of ethical reflection the vulnerability of living beings and the growing asymmetry between technological power and moral judgement, Jonas profoundly influenced contemporary bioethics, particularly regarding issues arising from biotechnology, end-of-life medicine, and transformations of the human condition.

The growing complexity of these issues calls for a clearer articulation of the relationship between bioethics and theological reflection, especially when considering how theological rationality might be integrated into a largely secular bioethical framework grounded primarily in philosophical assumptions.

Drawing on professional experience at the intersection of bioethics and theology, this chapter adopts a reflexive methodological approach to clarify how such

[1] See Richard E. Ashcroft, "Constructing Empirical Bioethics: Foucauldian Reflections on the Empirical Turn in Bioethics Research," *Health Care Analysis* 11, no. 1 (2003): 3–13, https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025329811812. See also Pascal Borry, Paul Schotsmans, and Kris Dierickx, "The Birth of the Empirical Turn in Bioethics," *Bioethics* 19, no. 1 (2005): 52, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8519.2005.00426.x.

[2] Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

an articulation can be developed. It examines the articulation between bioethics and theology as a structured three-stage process—contextualization, decontextualization, and recontextualization—each contributing in a complementary way to the production and emergence of meaning. To support this framework, an illustrative case drawn from our fieldwork experience is presented.

1. Contextualisation

Bioethics has historically developed at the intersection of several major philosophical traditions. It has drawn its conceptual resources from Kantian deontology, from consequentialism and utilitarianism, as well as from virtue ethics inherited from Aristotle and renewed in contemporary moral philosophy.[3] To these approaches has been added principlism,[4] which has had a decisive influence on Anglo-American bioethics. This theoretical diversity has contributed to structuring a field characterized by a strong demand for rational justification of clinical decisions, while also generating recurring debates on the respective roles of normative principles, practical judgment, and empirical data in ethical deliberation.[5]

However, this orientation has been subject to recurrent criticism, primarily for its sometimes excessively abstract character and its tendency to privilege theoretical constructions detached from concrete situations. It is also criticized for insufficiently considering actual practices, as well as the institutional, organizational, and contextual constraints that shape clinical decision-making in real-world settings. Principlism has significantly shaped contemporary clinical bioethics by structuring moral reasoning around four guiding principles: autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. However, it is frequently criticized for its limited ability to capture the complexity and specificity of clinical contexts, particularly when these principles conflict or fail to provide clear guidance for action. Thus, rather than constituting a unified normative framework, principlism is often regarded as a heuristic device for mapping moral issues, rather than a robust theory capable of adequately addressing the inherent complexity of contemporary bioethical dilemmas.

EBB seeks to overcome these limitations by emphasizing the necessity of grounding ethical judgments and decisions in empirical data, drawn notably from clinical studies, epidemiological research, and behavioural analyses. It is distinguished by the systematic integration of data, their prioritization, and their classification in terms of robustness, as well as by the establishment of explicit links

[3] See Edmund D. Pellegrino and David C. Thomasma, *The Virtues in Medical Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[4] See Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

[5] See Albert R. Jonsen, Mark Siegler, and William J. Winslade, *Clinical Ethics: A Practical Approach to Ethical Decisions in Clinical Medicine*, 8th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2015). See also Jeremy Sugarman and Daniel P. Sulmasy, eds., *Methods in Medical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010).

between empirical findings and decision-making procedures. EBB also presents itself as an attempt to connect normative principles with empirically observable outcomes.

However, this approach risks empirical reductionism, insofar as EBB sometimes tends to subordinate ethical decision-making to quantitative data, at the expense of the deliberative and pluralistic dimensions of bioethics, as well as the need for a critical hermeneutic foundation. Moreover, the direct transposition of the hierarchy of evidence from EBB to normative bioethics remains problematic. Nevertheless, EBB does not seek to replace theoretical and critical reflection, but rather to enrich it through a more robust consideration of evidence and the complexity of concrete situations.[6] It thus constitutes an attempt to overcome the traditional separation between theory and practice, opening the way toward reflexive, pragmatic, and critical bioethics.

EBB is defined as a descriptive rather than normative approach, insofar as it aims to analyse, describe, and systematize the concepts, arguments, values, rules, norms, principles, models, and theories mobilized in concrete situations. It can thus contribute to the resolution of moral dilemmas by considering the actual decision-making processes of healthcare professionals, their specific contexts, as well as the subjective, relational, and social dimensions that influence their choices.

Alexander Kon proposes four levels of EBB contribution to ethical reflection: (1) defining practices, opinions, beliefs, values, and commonly assumed models; (2) assessing the extent to which clinical practices reflect and express theories, models, and rules of normative and theoretical bioethics; (3) identifying ways to improve healthcare by testing new methods to help clinicians care for patients in a manner more consistent with ethical standards; (4) supporting the revision and transformation of ethical rules and norms based on analyses of multiple clinical studies.[7]

EBB does not yet have a truly unified or consensual methodological framework. To progress in this direction, bioethicists must more explicitly question the nature and scope of the claims they intend to derive from empirical data analysis.[8] Empirical data may illuminate the consequences of a policy, reveal actors' preferences, or uncover inequalities, but it cannot by itself determine what is morally right or desirable. The classical distinction between *is* and *ought* thus retains its

[6] See Maya J. Goldenberg, "Evidence-Based Ethics? On Evidence-Based Practice and the 'Empirical Turn' from Normative Bioethics," *BMC Medical Ethics* 6 (2005), https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6939-6-11. See also Maya J. Goldenberg, "On Evidence and Evidence-Based Medicine: Lessons from the Philosophy of Science," *Social Science & Medicine* 62, no. 11 (2006), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.11.039.

[7] Alexander A. Kon, "The Role of Empirical Research in Bioethics," *American Journal of Bioethics* 9, nos. 6–7 (2009), https://doi.org/10.1080/15265160902934096.

[8] See Ruth Davies, Jenny Ives, and Michael Dunn, "A Systematic Review of Empirical Bioethics Methodologies," *BMC Medical Ethics* 16 (2015): 15, https://doi.org/10.1186/s12910-015-0010-3.

full relevance in EBB. There remains a risk of moving too quickly from descriptive findings to normative discourse—in other words, of shifting from *facts* to *values* and *norms* without rigorous justification. This methodological difficulty, however, does not undermine either the legitimacy or the relevance of EBB contributions, whose results retain significant heuristic and critical value.[9]

The emergence of EBB constitutes a significant development in contemporary bioethical reflection. By systematically integrating empirical data, EBB responds to a growing demand to consider the lived realities of patients, healthcare professionals, and institutions, while fostering a better understanding of the contexts in which ethical decisions are made.

The future of EBB therefore seems to lie in the development of genuinely integrative methodologies capable of combining empirical rigour with normative argumentation. Rather than substituting data for ethical principles, the aim is to promote a productive dialogue between experience and theory. Studies in empirical bioethics show that qualitative and quantitative research can help identify neglected moral problems, test the feasibility of recommendations, or enrich deliberative processes, without claiming to resolve normative questions themselves.[10]

From this perspective, EBB appears as a methodological program aimed at producing a more reflexive, context-sensitive, and complexity-aware bioethics. Its major value lies in its capacity to foster interdisciplinary bioethics in which theoretical and empirical investigation mutually reinforce one another.

2. De-contextualization

Faith may be the object of a conceptual and speculative reappropriation aimed at bringing to light its intelligible content from the various languages in which it is expressed: Scripture, Tradition and traditions, liturgy, rites and religious practices, Christian and mystical experience. Theology is not a mere repetition of or commentary on these languages; rather, it constitutes a second-order language—a hermeneutical endeavour seeking to articulate the intelligibility of faith.

It thus unfolds as a systematic effort of understanding that arises within the life of faith itself, developing under its light (*sub lumine fidei*). As a hermeneutical science of faith, theology opens the possibility of multiple authentic and legitimate interpretations, shaped by specific historical, cultural, and social contexts.

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[9] See Pietro Corsico, "Is Hume's Law a Valid Argument Against Empirical Bioethics?" *Bioethics* 39, no. 5 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1111/bioe.70000.

[10] See Pascal Borry, Paul Schotsmans, and Kris Dierickx, "Evidence-Based Medicine and Its Role in Ethical Decision-Making," *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice* 12, no. 3 (2006), https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2753.2006.00649.x. See also A. C. Molewijk et al., "Empirical Data and Moral Theory: A Plea for Integrated Empirical Ethics." *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2004): 55–69, https://doi.org/10.1023/B:MHCP.0000015999.87657.1f.

This plurality of interpretations resists any claim to a single, normative, or absolute reading, and stands against any definitive and absolute interpretation. As the motu proprio *Ad theologiam promovendam* states:

> Promoting theology in the future cannot be reduced to the abstract re-proposition of past formulas and frameworks. Called to prophetically interpret the present and to discern new paths for the future in the light of Revelation, theology must confront profound cultural transformations, aware that "what we are experiencing is not merely an era of change, but a change of era."[11]

A far-reaching methodological and epistemological transformation in theology is therefore required. This demand involves a profound reconfiguration of its forms of rationality, its hermeneutical procedures, and its relation to reality. From this perspective, theology is called to constitute itself as an intelligence of faith that is culturally and historically situated. It can no longer develop within a disembodied abstraction or a closed theoretical system, but must fully assume its embeddedness in historical, social, cultural, and existential contexts. Theology is thus invited to interpret events, situations, and lived experiences not as peripheral data, but as places in which the plurality of human experience becomes manifest. Understood in this way, theology also becomes a hermeneutics of experience, attuned to the concrete textures of everyday existence.

Theology must be able to integrate, discern, and rework categories drawn from other fields of knowledge and experience. Notions elaborated in fields such as clinical practice, psychology, philosophy or the human sciences may be detached from their original epistemic framework and reinscribed within another horizon of meaning, namely that of the intelligence of faith. Theology is called to exercise a genuine capacity for creative assimilation. Concepts drawn from contemporary forms of knowledge are subjected to critical discernment and receive renewed significance under the light of faith and the exercise of theological reason. Theological fruitfulness also depends on the capacity to assume new categories emerging from lived experience to penetrate more deeply the truths of faith and to communicate them in renewed forms that remain faithful to the sources of faith, while attentive to the languages and experiences of the present.

A dialogical and transformative model of theology thus emerges, rooted in revelation yet open to the multiple mediations of human knowledge; it becomes a site of reciprocal interpretation between the Gospel and cultures, between ecclesial tradition and contemporary forms of rationality and experience.

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[11] Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam*, Apostolic Letter Issued Motu Proprio on the Renewal of the Pontifical Academies (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), no. 1, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html.

What, then, is the role of theology in contemporary bioethical reflection? As an interpretative approach to the experience of faith, theology may adopt an integrative posture, receiving data from EBB and offering its own light and interpretation. This is not a normative stance aimed at avoiding objection or confrontation, but a hermeneutical effort capable of critical and constructive dialogue with empirical data and emerging concepts from the field. Christian bioethics must recognise that arguments from authority no longer carry evidential force in a context largely inhospitable to religious convictions. It is therefore necessary to develop modes of articulation that render theological positions intelligible and relevant, expressing Christian faith and hope in a meaningful way.

Christian bioethics, understood as a theological ethics, stands at the intersection between the intelligence of faith and the rational analysis of contemporary biomedical practices. It receives empirical data to examine, describe, and assess their anthropological and ethical significance. From this perspective, the task is not only to describe facts analytically, but also to construct coherent ethical frameworks, and propose normative orientations capable of illuminating clinical practice, biomedical research, and clinical decision-making. This approach unfolds in rigorous exchange with the human and social sciences, while preserving its theological specificity. It therefore belongs to a transdisciplinary approach, understood not as a mere juxtaposition of disciplines but as a genuinely integrative interaction. As *Veritatis gaudium* states:

> Today's recovery of an interdisciplinary approach is certainly positive and promising, even in its "weak" form as a simple multidisciplinary approach that favours a better understanding from several points of view of an object of study. It is all the more so in its "strong" form, as cross-disciplinary, situating and stimulating all disciplines against the backdrop of the Light and Life offered by the Wisdom streaming from God's Revelation.[12]

Theology remains attentive to signs of transcendence emerging within human experience. Its task is then to discern, within empirical data, narratives and experiences from EBB, the fundamental questions of human existence, to render them intelligible and illuminate them in the light of Revelation. In this hermeneutical dynamic, it also mobilises its own anthropological resources to respond to the most complex dilemmas. Theological reflection must unfold without opposition between theory and practice, following an inductive method that begins from concrete contexts and lived situations, allowing itself to be challenged by reality.

[12] Francis, *Veritatis gaudium*, Apostolic Constitution on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2017), Proem., no. 4(c), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20171208_veritatis-gaudium.html.

For bioethics, this provides an opportunity to articulate the relationship between implicit values in its practice and the intelligibility of faith. In this perspective, theology may be understood as playing a key role in questioning the meaning of existence, ultimate concerns, and fundamental values, while attesting to their continued relevance within the horizon of rational discourse. Situated within ongoing societal transformations, it appears in the space of public reason as a site for the proposal of meaning in the face of reductionist materialism, ethical relativism, and nihilism.

Moreover, theology denounces ethical orientations that may endanger the future of humanity; it warns against the institutionalization of ethics in the service of dominant ideologies; it critiques the illusion of absolute mastery over the human person and cautions against the risks of manipulation, reduction, or artificial enhancement; it grounds the infinite dignity of the human being; and finally, it offers a strong critique of contemporary transhumanist and posthumanist tendencies.[13]

3. Recontextualization

The interaction between EBB and Christian bioethics forms a complex framework aimed at integrating empirical findings, normative bioethical concepts, and theological insights grounded in Revelation. This process of recontextualization aims to establish a balance between the contributions of EBB and the theological perspective, while remaining attentive to the cultural, social, and personal contexts in which ethical decisions are formulated. Christian bioethics thus draws upon values and principles derived from the religious tradition—human dignity, sanctity of life, freedom, responsibility, compassion, justice, and charity—which are presented as guiding reference points for theological ethics.

Within the dynamics of recontextualization, Christian bioethics nevertheless offers a broad and demanding framework for ethical discernment, affirming the intrinsic value of human life in the face of the pragmatic or utilitarian logics of healthcare institutions. It contributes to broadening ethical reflection by raising transversal issues such as universal access to healthcare, solidarity with the most vulnerable, and the rights of marginalized persons. Likewise, it advances well-defined positions on sensitive issues such as genetic manipulation, assisted reproductive technologies, the commodification of the human body, and medically assisted dying, with the aim of reaffirming the infinite dignity of every human person in all circumstances, from birth until natural death.

The articulation between EBB and Christian bioethics requires a dialogical and iterative process: it is not a matter of mechanically applying predefined principles and norms to situations, but rather of bringing faith into resonance with empirical

[13] See Paulo Rodrigues, "Anthropologie chrétienne et transhumanisme," *ET Studies* 10, no. 2 (2019).

data, clinical practices, and sociocultural contexts. In this perspective, fundamental values such as solidarity, compassion and justice find concrete expression in equitable and unconditional patient care, regardless of social, economic, or medical status. This imperative is expressed particularly in preferential attention to the most vulnerable—terminally ill patients, those with chronic conditions, the elderly, and persons living with disabilities.

For instance, within Christian bioethics, the notion of justice occupies a structuring role. It is not reducible to formal equality of access to care, but entails a fair distribution of resources, treatments, and clinical attention according to patients' actual needs. Healthcare justice thus implies correcting the social and institutional imbalances that affect health and engages care providers in a collective responsibility. From a Christian bioethical perspective, this justice is inseparable from human dignity: it calls for recognizing each patient as a subject of rights, rather than as a mere carrier of pathology or a unit of cost.

Christian bioethics emphasizes shared moral responsibility between patients and physicians. Clinical decisions must be guided by discernment, with the dual aim of promoting the patient's well-being while respecting their dignity and freedom. Such an approach leads to conceiving autonomy not as absolute independence, but as relational autonomy, understood within the horizon of a network of mutual responsibilities and human solidarity.

4. A Case Illustration from Field Research

4.1. Contextualization

Our PhD in Biomedical Sciences (Public Health), defended at the Faculty of Medicine of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in 2024, enabled us to acquire research skills in EBB, through the exploration of palliative sedation for existential suffering (PS-ES). The systematic literature reviews conducted,[14] as well as the exploratory qualitative field studies,[15] provided empirical data on how physicians ethically apprehend this end-of-life intervention.

[14] See Paulo Rodrigues et al., "Palliative Sedation for Existential Suffering: A Systematic Review of Argument-Based Literature," *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management* 55, no. 6 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpainsymman.2018.01.013. See also Paulo Rodrigues et al., "Physicians' Perceptions of Palliative Sedation for Existential Suffering: A Systematic Review," *BMJ Supportive & Palliative Care* 10, no. 2 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjspcare-2018-001660.

[15] See Paulo Rodrigues et al., "Ethics of Sedation for Existential Suffering: Palliative Medicine Physicians' Perceptions," *BMJ Supportive & Palliative Care* 13, no. 2 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1136/spcare-2021-003131. See also Paulo Rodrigues et al., "Palliative Care Physicians' Decision-Making About Palliative Sedation for Existential Suffering," *Palliative & Supportive Care* 22, no. 1 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478951523000304.

The EBB studies conducted showed that palliative sedation for existential suffering (PS-ES) remains a controversial practice, characterized by a lack of consensus regarding both its definition and its conditions of application. While practitioners tend to favour a cautious and multidisciplinary approach, they remain ethically ambivalent about the legitimacy of this intervention. These studies particularly highlight that clinical decision-making is not based solely on a medical assessment of symptoms but is also shaped by physicians' implicit anthropological frameworks.

The data analysis made it possible to identify several recurrent criteria in decision-making: the importance of the patient's request, the use of PS-ES as a last resort after all alternatives have been exhausted, the combination of refractory existential suffering with other forms of suffering, and the terminal condition of the patient. Furthermore, practitioners emphasize the necessity of a multidisciplinary decision-making process, supported by an interpretive dialogue involving the patient, the family, and the healthcare team.

4.2. Decontextualization

Building on the findings obtained through the EBB approach, we explored anthropological models that may implicitly influence physicians' clinical and ethical decisions (physicalism, emergentism, dualism, psychologism, spiritualism, holism, phenomenology, personalism, post-materialism, etc.). Current research suggests that materialism, physicalism, and dualism tend to be increasingly superseded by a post-materialist turn oriented toward a holistic model of medicine integrating the psychological, social, relational, and spiritual dimensions of the person.[16]

This perspective calls for a broadened understanding of the human person, attentive not only to its biological and psychological dimensions, but also to its symbolic, ritual, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. Within such a framework, the human being can no longer be reduced to a merely functional or purely organic totality; rather, it must be understood as a dynamic unity of meaning, embedded within signifying practices and a network of relations.

In this hermeneutical context, our research investigates the heuristic potential of the body–soul–spirit model, not as a merely descriptive anthropological schema, but as a conceptual framework capable of enriching contemporary medical anthropology. The objective is not to set this model in opposition to prevailing biomedical paradigms, but rather to assess its capacity to retrieve and articulate the integrative depth of human experience, especially as it pertains to suffering, healing, and care.

[16] See Mario Beauregard, Gary E. Schwartz, Lisa Miller, Larry Dossey, Bruce Greyson, Adam Crabtree, and Pim van Lommel, eds., *Expanding Science: Visions of a Post-Materialist Paradigm* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2018).

Reoriented in this way, our inquiry seeks to elaborate a multidimensional anthropology grounded in the recognition of the structural and existential unity of body–mind–spirit. This unity should not be understood as a simple juxtaposition of distinct ontological levels, but rather as a living articulation, in which each dimension is constituted through its constitutive relation to the others.

It is within this perspective that we turn to the thought of Irenaeus of Lyons (2nd century), one of the earliest Church Fathers to offer a systematic anthropological reflection. His understanding of the unity of the human being provides a particularly fruitful framework for theological anthropology, while resisting the dualistic tendencies that have at times shaped the history of Christian thought. In Irenaeus, the human person appears as an integrated reality, body–mind–spirit, called to the fullness of spiritual life, without the dissolution or negation of its bodily and historical dimensions.

We also aim to clarify how contemporary philosophy develops a holistic anthropological model in which the human being is understood as a unified reality rather than as a composite divided into body, mind, and soul. Our guiding hypothesis is that the philosophical anthropology of Xavier Zubiri (1898–1983) provides a promising foundation for articulating such an integrated account of the body–mind–spirit unity. Central to Zubiri's framework is the notion of "sentient intelligence," according to which sensing and knowing constitute a single, indivisible act of apprehension.

4.3. Recontextualization

The decontextualization phase leads to the consideration of specific actions in the field of research. For example, we claim that the training of medical students and healthcare professionals should integrate the anthropological and existential dimensions of clinical practice, to avoid a strictly physicalist and materialistic approach that would neglect the holistic nature of the patient, including cultural, social, existential and spiritual dimensions.

The biopsychosocial model[17] marked a shift away from medical reductionism by integrating biological, psychological, and social dimensions. Daniel Sulmasy expanded this model by proposing the biopsychosocial-spiritual model,[18] which emphasizes the importance of meaning, ultimate values, and, for some patients, a relationship to Transcendence.[19] These approaches provide a theoretical and

[17] George L. Engel, "The Need for a New Medical Model: A Challenge for Biomedicine," *Science* 196, no. 4286 (1977), https://doi.org/10.1126/science.847460.

[18] See Daniel P. Sulmasy, *The Rebirth of the Clinic: An Introduction to Spirituality in Health Care* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014).

[19] See Stéfanie Monod-Zorzi, Étienne Rochat, Charles J. Büla, and Barbara Spencer, "The Spiritual Distress Assessment Tool (SDAT): An Instrument to Assess Spiritual Distress in Hospitalised Elderly Persons," *BMC Geriatrics* 10 (2010), https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2318-10-88.

practical foundation for a truly person-centred medicine that addresses total suffering.[20]

The contribution of theology to EBB can be understood as the provision of a hermeneutical framework capable of articulating the anthropological and ethical presuppositions embedded in healthcare practices. Theology does not function primarily as a source of concrete rules for clinical decision-making. Instead, its primary contribution lies in shaping interpretive frameworks. In this sense, theology works at the level of orientation rather than regulation. Rather than functioning as an external or confessional discourse, theology operates here as a critical anthropological reflection, clarifying the implicit models of the human person that shape clinical decision-making and caregiving practices.

In this sense, theological anthropology offers a comprehensive vision of the human person, integrating bodily, psychological, relational, and spiritual dimensions. It resists reductive accounts of the patient that are limited to biological functionality or technical manageability. Instead, it advances a holistic understanding of personhood grounded in notions of dignity, relationality, finitude, and transcendence. This integrative approach aligns with broader movements in philosophical anthropology and bioethics that argue for the necessity of explicit anthropological frameworks in healthcare ethics.

From this perspective, theology enhances the intelligibility of clinical practices by situating experiences of illness, vulnerability, and caregiving within broader frameworks of meaning, value, and purpose. It interprets suffering not only as a biomedical condition but also as an existential and relational event that calls for interpretation and response. This hermeneutical dimension has been extensively developed in contemporary theological ethics and pastoral theology, particularly in dialogue with phenomenology and narrative approaches to care.

Furthermore, theological reflection can contribute to the normative grounding of healthcare practices, particularly those oriented toward person-centred care, accompaniment, and the affirmation of human dignity. By articulating the ethical implications of a relational and integrated anthropology, theology helps justify caregiving practices that cannot be reduced to technical intervention alone. This contribution is especially significant in contemporary healthcare systems, where technological rationality risks marginalising the relational and existential dimensions of care.

In this context, theology functions as a critical resource that foregrounds human vulnerability and interdependence. It thereby offers a counterpoint to tendencies toward overconfidence in technical control and the implicit presumption of mastery within medical practice. Rather than opposing medical progress, it serves as

[20] See Cicely Saunders, "The Evolution of Palliative Care," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 83, no. 7 (1990), https://doi.org/10.1177/014107689008300712. See also Roger Ruiz-Moral, "Person-Centered Medicine: An Existential Outline Beyond the Biopsychosocial Model," *International Journal of Person Centered Medicine* 6, no. 1 (2016).

a critical corrective that re-situates clinical expertise within a broader ethical horizon of care.

Finally, theology fosters interdisciplinary dialogue between medicine, philosophy, and the human sciences, reinforcing the ethical coherence of healthcare institutions and their commitment to holistic care.

Conclusion

EBB provides indispensable rigour by objectifying clinical practices and identifying patterns in decision-making and ethical reasoning. It renders visible what would otherwise remain implicit or unarticulated. However, such evidential clarification is not sufficient to exhaust the meaning of medical action nor to resolve the full range of ethical questions it raises.

It is precisely at this point that theological insight, and more specifically Christian bioethics, becomes salient. By introducing a sustained interrogation of the unconditional dignity of the person, the meaning of suffering, and the ultimate telos of human existence, it displaces any reduction of clinical reasoning to efficiency or a utilitarian perspective. It thereby opens a critical space in which empirical findings are reinterpreted within an anthropology that understands the person as relational and teleologically oriented.

The result is not a mere aggregation of perspectives, but a reconfiguration of ethical reasoning itself. It enables the articulation—without conflation—of descriptive, interpretative, and normative registers, while preserving the productive tension between them. Ultimately, this integrated approach contributes to a bioethical approach more attentive to the irreducible complexity of clinical situations. It guards against the symmetrical risks of empirical reductionism and normative abstraction, while sustaining a shared space of deliberation. Within this space, a more genuinely human practice of care may emerge, capable of accompanying end-of-life situations without reducing persons to biological parameters or clinical decision-making to procedural logic, and instead situating care within a broadened understanding of what it means both to cure and to care.

In pluralistic societies, theology cannot claim a privileged or universal authority in public ethical justification. Its role is therefore indirect, dialogical, and contributory rather than determinative. It participates in bioethical reflection without seeking to govern the terms of public reasoning, thereby locating theological discourse within a shared ethical space.

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PART V. SCRIPTURE, DOCTRINE, HERMENEUTICS, AND THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

THE DIVINE TRIALOGUE:

APPROACHING GOD THROUGH THE METAPHOR OF DIALOGUE

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Abstract

This chapter investigates the extent to which dialogue can serve as a recontextualising metaphor for the divine mystery and, more specifically, as a fundamental-theological category for revelation. Drawing on postconciliar magisterial teaching and dialogical hermeneutics, it develops the notion of a "divine trialogue" through the Father's initiative and the economic missions of the Son and Holy Spirit. First, it argues that speaking of "God as dialogue" need not objectify the immanent Trinity: since authentic dialogue approaches the other without comprehension or totalisation, the metaphor preserves divine transcendence while making relational language about God possible. Second, the incarnation is interpreted as the pre-eminent revelatory word-deed, in which speaking and acting, language and embodiment, as well as universality and historical particularity converge. Third, the chapter locates the continuation of divine-human dialogue in the mission of the Holy Spirit, discerned within embodied, intersubjective encounters. Revelation therefore entails more than the transmission and passive reception of divine content. Faith is an active, responsive participation in God's self-communication, which highlights the baptismal agency of believers and illuminates Scripture, tradition, councils, and synodality as dialogical processes of communal discernment.

Keywords: Dialogue; divine revelation; Trinity; incarnation; Holy Spirit; recontextualization.

Introduction

This chapter explores the extent to which theology can approach the divine mystery through the metaphorical lens of dialogue and tentatively suggests what this could mean for the practice of theology today. Given dialogue's growing assimilation in magisterial teaching beyond ecumenical and interreligious relations, its

prevalence across numerous academic disciplines, as well as its conceptual richness, the chapter considers the concept as a key touchstone for the contemporary Western critical consciousness and, as such, lends itself to a renewed trinitarian theology. The *divine trialogue*, in this way, provides a means by which theology itself becomes recontextualised.

Structured within a trinitarian framework, the chapter will begin by firstly considering Godself as dialogical and the extent to which this metaphor is meaningful for the relational God. Secondly, it will investigate the dialogical quality of the pre-eminent word-deed of revelation, the Word made flesh, which underscores the embodied nature and particularity of the Christian faith. Finally, the ongoing mission of the Holy Spirit is presented as the very locus of revelatory, divine dialogue. Given the intersubjective dynamic of revelation in the Spirit, this third section considers human agency in the divine-human dialogue, arguing that taking dialogue seriously entails not mere passive obedience but an active, reciprocal exchange. Theology itself, consequently, is called to genuine dialogue, a task that requires not only speaking but also a deep and meaningful listening to its context.

God Encountered as Dialogue

The Church's deepening appreciation for dialogue since the Second Vatican Council is rooted in the trinitarian mystery. Time and again, the Church appeals to the inner dynamics of the triune God as a basis for dialogue. According to Paul VI, the origin of dialogue is found "in the mind of God Himself [sic]."[1] *Dialogue and Mission* (1984) lays the foundation of "sincere" dialogue as one rooted in the Trinity's "life of communion and interchange."[2] Benedict XVI describes "the dialogue of love between the divine persons" in which we are invited to share.[3] Dialogue is "a constitutive dimension" of the Church precisely because of "the Trinitarian dynamics of dialogue."[4] Dialogue, then, has become a deeply theological category, both within and beyond the Church, rooted in its mysterious

[1] Paul VI, Encyclical Letter, *Ecclesiam suam* on the Church (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), no. 70, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html.

[2] Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, *The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1984), no. 22, https://www.dicasteryinterreligious.va/ wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Dialogue_and_Mission_ENG.pdf.

[3] Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, Post-Synodal Exhortation on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2010), no. 6, https://www.vatican.va/ content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/ hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini.html.

[4] Dicastery for Culture and Education, *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022), no. 30, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc _20220125_istruzione-identita-scuola-cattolica_en.html#_ftn2.

imitation of the immanent life of the Trinity. While the purpose of this chapter is not to present a theology of the Trinity, it is worth examining the extent to which "dialogue" can be understood as a metaphor for God. To what extent, in other words, can we say God is encountered *as dialogue*?

As with any metaphor used to understand aspects of the divine nature, dialogue will ultimately fall short, no matter how useful it might be to highlight the inherently relational nature of creation arising from its trinitarian origin. The tradition of apophatic theology reminds us that every metaphor speaks more to what God *is not*, rather than any positive affirmation of the divine.[5] Emmanuel Levinas also reminds us that transcendence, if it is truly transcendent, is "otherwise than being" and cannot be totalised by any finite, conceptual understanding whatsoever.[6] At the same time, Levinasian dialogue is a relation that opens us up to that which is beyond our immanent experience: it is the concrete appearance of transcendence in the face of the other. So, while authentic dialogue does not attempt or even presume to capture transcendence, it is the only way to be in relation to it.

It becomes important to clarify, however, that one uses the image of dialogue for God not to understand Godself as dialogical (since Godself simply cannot be understood objectively) but to draw attention to the fact that one now understands "God as dialogue" *arising from our contemporary human understanding of dialogue*. Rather than trying to interpret dialogue as an attribute or quality of the divine, recontextualisation means that the increasing appreciation of dialogue in the contemporary consciousness assists theology in its approach to God and revelation. In other words, taking recontextualisation seriously recognises that theology's understanding of God has always developed by recontextualising the Christian faith with new insights shaped by the contemporary critical consciousness. Once the new interpretation of the dialogical God is integrated into contemporary theology it becomes normative in much the same way the Church has adopted the category for dialogue since Vatican II for what is now official, magisterial teaching. The moment theology is able to understand "God as dialogue" in a recontextualised way, it becomes normative for our understandings of both God and dialogue.

Dialogue transforms our understanding of God for the current context and by doing so provides a standard for how dialogue is understood by theology and

[5] As the Fourth Lateran Council declared: "For between creator and creature there can be noted no similarity so great that a greater dissimilarity cannot be seen between them." Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils,* vol. 1, *Nicaea I to Lateran V* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 232. Reflecting on Dionysius's apophatic-theological approach, Mezei remarks that "negative theology" is neither negative nor positive but its paradoxical style "suggest[s] a denial of denial itself" so that all negation of any proposition about God positively affirms the inability to speak of Godself. Balázs M. Mezei, *Radical Revelation: A Philosophical Approach* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 125.

[6] See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Boston: M. Nijhoff Publishers, 1969).

realised in the Church today. One significant advantage of dialogue is its inbuilt capacity (emerging from the concept itself) to maintain the necessary and insurmountable "gap" between language about God (theology) and that of which we cannot speak (transcendence or Godself).[7] In other words, *dialogue itself* witnesses to the fact that the divine Other (and every other) is approached, responded to, but never comprehended. At the same time, it provides the opening for interpersonal language that makes prayer and relationship to God conceivable.[8] However, it is only by considering the outworkings (the phenomena) of divine-human dialogue (creation, the Incarnation, the work of the Spirit) from a faith perspective that one can begin to point to the theological significance of God's trialogue.[9]

The divine-human dialogue is a unique and living event only insofar as *it happens with someone in a particular time and place*. Revelation is a *concrete* word-event that reveals divine transcendence. Understanding God encountered as dialogue helps a renewed approach to a theology of revelation by means of the missions of the Son and Holy Spirit, to which this chapter now turns. "God as dialogue" only emerges from a recontextualisation of the economic Trinity. The divine-human dialogue initiated by God the Father from the moment of creation has been irrevocably enfleshed through the incarnation of the Logos in the historical person of Jesus, and continues to be enlivened until today through the Spirit.[10]

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[7] Indeed, for thinkers like Levinas, transcendence as such "refuses" dialogue but rather commands me in a radically asymmetrical manner. See Emmanuel Levinas, "Dialogue," in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 75–76.

[8] See Gerald O'Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1999), 175.

[9] One can point to Rahner's *Grundaxiom*: "the 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity." Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (London: Burns and Oates, 1970), 22. That is to say, the dialogical way God reveals Godself in creation, the incarnation, and the ongoing mission of the Holy Spirit, speaks to the very mystery of the Trinity. Holzer points out that the Rahnerian axiom is part of his theology of grace "according to the dynamic of a differentiated and immediate relation with each of the divine persons" and not as a participation in an abstract understanding of divine nature. Vincent Holzer, "Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Twentieth-Century Catholic Currents on the Trinity," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 315, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199557813.003.0023.

[10] See *Ecclesiam Suam*, 71. Latourelle points to the trinitarian character of revelation as dialogue, underlined by *Ecclesiam Suam*, when he writes: "le Père, qui a l'initiative du dialogue ; le Verbe qui, par son Incarnation, en est le Médiateur ; l'Esprit enfin qui rend la parole du Christ soluble dans l'âme par l'onction qu'il y répand, car sans l'Esprit, qui transforme l'intelligence et le coeur, comment l'homme s'ouvrirait-il à ce qui lui est étranger ?" René Latourelle, "La Révélation comme dialogue dans 'Ecclesiam suam,'" *Gregorianum* 46, no. 4 (1965): 834–39.

The Word-Deed, or *Logos-Incarnatio*, of Revelation

The Christ-event, the mystery of the incarnation, brings to the fore three aspects of the revelatory dialogue worth highlighting: (i) the symbolic character of revelation as a word-deed (speech-act); (ii) the flesh as constitutive of dialogue; and (iii) the significance of its particularity, or concreteness, in history.

Firstly, the symbolic character of revelation. If two overarching models can be said to sum up modern theological approaches to revelation, that is, "the God who acts" and "the God who speaks," dialogue as a speech-act allows theology to embrace both.[11] The biblical Hebrew term *dabar* already points to both word (as a noun) and event (as a verb) within the same concept.[12] Both aspects operate in and through each other. As Bernard of Clairvaux reminds us, the Christian faith is not a "religion of the book" but of the Word, "not a written and mute word, but the Word which is incarnate and living."[13] Certainly, within a dialogical framework, speech (word) is always an action (deed), and actions or events (deeds) are always and necessarily interpreted into language (words). This, moreover, gives revelation an inherent symbolic character.

The Christian doctrine of the incarnation ties divine transcendence unequivocally to human carnality, and here we come to the second aspect. The incarnation reveals to us that Word is flesh and thus all words are flesh.[14] While, of course, the activity of dialoguing cannot function without the bodily operations of mouth and ear, Christianity's commitment to sacramentality means that the significance of body runs much deeper than operating as simply an organ of the mind. The same must be said of dialogue. The full significance of dialogue as the relation with transcendence (of the Other and all others) means that body is no mere instrument but intrinsic to dialogue itself. Dialogue is as much a physical, carnal

[11] See Paul Avis, "Revelation, Epistemology, and Authority," in *The Oxford Handbook of Divine Revelation*, ed. Balázs M. Mezei, Francesca Aran Murphy, and Kenneth Oakes (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 173, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198795353.013.13. Avis suggests the need for a third model, 'the God who hides Godself,' in order to safeguard divine transcendence, which this chapter argues dialogue precisely does.

[12] Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 67. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic*, s.v. "דָּבָר" (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 180–85. Both the verb ῥῆμα ("saying" or "thing said") and λόγος are used in the Septuagint to translate this Hebrew term.

[13] Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones super Missus est*, sermo 4, §11, PL 183:86C–87A (Paris: Apud Garnier, 1854), cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 108.

[14] The core intuition of carnal hermeneutics is that all words are flesh: "text is body and body is text." Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, "Introduction: Carnal Hermeneutics from Head to Foot," in *Carnal Hermeneutics*, ed. Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 2, https://doi.org/10.5422/fordham/9780823265886.003.0020.

concept as a linguistic one. And not in spite of each other (in a kind of dialectic), but precisely because dialogue works from and through the body, and the body comes to discover its meaning through linguistic dialogue. Such a perspective gives contemporary relational ontologies their full dialogical weight.

One final aspect of revelatory dialogue that comes into sharp relief with the incarnation is the significance of its concreteness in human history. The pinnacle of divine revelation is actualised in the utterly tangible and radically particular. God no longer simply communicates *by means* of created reality but *becomes identified with it* in a human person of a certain time and place. Divine revelation is condensed, not only in words spoken and deeds accomplished, but in *a life lived*. Suddenly, our feeble attempts to conceptualise the immanent life of the Trinity through the metaphor of "God as dialogue" can begin to take shape (incarnate) and make sense, since theology's task is seen as the drawing out of meaning from a divine transcendence who wants to be encountered only within and through the immanent. The particular becomes the very condition for God's self-revelation and not something to be surpassed, ignored, or relativised by revelation's universal value.[15] Far from being an inconvenient obstacle, theology must lean into this particularity by means of a radical hermeneutics.[16] The incarnation is the key for a dialogical-hermeneutical paradigm that embraces the uniqueness of the Christ-event in history and reminds us that we cannot theologise about revelation outside language and context.

Before turning to the mission of the Spirit, it is worth mentioning the everyday encounters that made up the preaching ministry of Jesus. While there is no time in the present chapter to explore this further, needless to say, the miracles and parables of Jesus are thoroughly dialogical and, in this way, disclose something profound of the divine pedagogy through salvation history.

God Encountered in Dialogue: The Ongoing Mission of the Holy Spirit

While the Spirit is the one with whom believers have the most immediate connection, the third person of the Trinity remains perhaps the most enigmatic.[17] The invisible indwelling of the Spirit in the human person underlines this mystery and points to the experience of grace as an important locus of revelation.[18] It is, therefore, to the economic activity of the Spirit and what O'Collins would describe as

[15] Lieven Boeve, "God, Particularity and Hermeneutics," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 81, no. 4 (2005): 330, https://doi.org/10.2143/ETL.81.4.2004472.

[16] Boeve, "God, Particularity and Hermeneutics," 330.

[17] Bruce D. Marshall, "The Deep Things of God: Trinitarian Pneumatology," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, 400, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199557813.003.0030.

[18] Theologies of revelation that accentuate the indwelling of the Holy Spirit fit into Dulles's third model, "revelation as inner experience." See Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 68–83. Experience, however, cannot be isolated from interpretation as if there could be some

"dependent revelation," specifically in the human person that this final part explores.[19] A key insight from Congar's extensive study of the Holy Spirit is that the Spirit's mission—including (but not limited to) the Spirit's indwelling in the human person and activity in the Church—means that both anthropology and ecclesiology are deeply pneumatological from the faith perspective.[20] While this short chapter cannot present an extensive Christian anthropology or ecclesiology, some perspectives begin to emerge from an appreciation of the dialogical nature of divine revelation. Dialogue emphasises *the intersubjective reality of revelation*: it is precisely within this dynamic where the Holy Spirit is found.

Reaching out towards the other captures something of the Spirit's mission in revelation. It is the Spirit who opens a person to that which is other.[21] The proper task of the Spirit is to lead people to the Son (and ultimately the Father) by means of all others. It is within this intersubjective dynamic of the divine-human dialogue where the Spirit operates. From such a perspective, *authentic* dialogue between persons can be identified as an activity of the Holy Spirit. When I am completely open and receptive to the other, willing to respond without intending to totalise or presume to fully understand the one before me, the Spirit is at work. The experience of authentic dialogue with the other is an experience of the grace of the Holy Spirit, who sustains the encounter and makes it revelatory of God. To put it another way, borrowing a phrase from Congar, dialogue bears the Spirit's "hypostatic stamp."[22]

"pure" or unmediated revelation. Louis Dupré—building upon Schillebeeckx and critiquing what he regards as the latter's relegation of interpretation after the primary place of experience—maintains that both come necessarily together. At the same time, *both develop* and so he argues for "a continuing process of interpreted experience." See Louis Dupré, "Experience and Interpretation: A Philosophical Reflection on Schillebeeckx's *Jesus* and *Christ*," *Theological Studies* 43, no. 1 (1982): 30–51, at 45, https://doi.org/10.1177/004056398204300102. See also Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 82–83.

[19] See Gerald O'Collins, *Revelation: Towards a Christian Interpretation of God's Self-Revelation in Jesus Christ* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 101–20, especially 113–17.

[20] See Elizabeth Teresa Groppe, *Yves Congar's Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4, 85–114, https://doi.org/10.1093/0195166426.001.0001. For Congar, a pneumatological anthropology and pneumatological ecclesiology should be integrated.

[21] To repeat part of the quotation from Latourelle, "La Révélation comme dialogue," 836: "car sans l'Esprit, qui transforme l'intelligence et le coeur, comment l'homme *s'ouvrirait-il à ce qui lui est étranger* ?" Italics mine.

[22] Yves Congar, "The Spirit is the Breath of the Word and the Spirit of the Son," in *The Spirit of God: Short Writings on the Holy Spirit*, trans. Susan Mader Brown et al. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 110. It is worth drawing attention to the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops that had synodality as its theme. Rather than the traditional approach to synods, this was a three-year process (2021–2024) of dialogue and listening at all levels of the Church. The method of "conversations in the Spirit" was adopted for the process, including the two sessions at the

"Authentic" is an important qualification: many seemingly dialogical encounters can be monologues in disguise. Just as human history cannot be completely identified with salvation history but needs discernment, dialogue too needs careful consideration in order to hear the true voice of God. Discernment becomes all the more relevant when one considers that the full spectrum of human experience, in view of the incarnation, is potentially revelatory in just the same way human history is potentially so. In the context of a theology of divine revelation, not only is it important that dialogue is authentic, but it can clearly only be revelatory when Godself is involved: a truly divine-human dialogue. I contend that whenever there is authentic dialogue—responsible, embodied and present openness to the other and to what they want to share, the willingness to sincerely respond, and the avoidance of any premature closure in consensus—the Spirit is at work and the voice of God can be heard. Dialogue, however, is always accompanied by hermeneutics and the (Ricoeurian) dialectic of a hermeneutics of trust and suspicion must always be at play. Indeed, dialogue thrives amidst a conflict of interpretations.

It is baptismal faith, marked by discipleship of Jesus and the indwelling of the Spirit, that enables the Christian to enter into the divine-human dialogue in an active and fully participative way. Just as there can be no revelation without it being recognised and received in faith, so there can be no dialogue without response and reciprocity.[23] Faith, a gift of grace that is confirmed in the sacraments of initiation, is the key to Christian identity and ecclesial unity. Certainly, God initiates the dialogue and invites humanity to respond. By hearing and discerning the voice of God through a revelatory word-deed, and acknowledging it as such, faith begins. This initial response to the prior and active word of God is an utterly passive listening (a gift given). From a faith perspective, however, the human response does not remain passive. The faith-filled person is invited to actively engage in a reciprocal dialogue with God since *God wants to hear and respond to what we have to say*. The intersubjective dynamic of the divine-human dialogue means that the people of God have active agency in God's revelation and not simply its passive recipients.

Baptism, marking the beginning of a person's faith journey within the ecclesial community, is the foundational moment of a lifelong dialogue with God where the person of faith truly responds in word and deed. Often baptism is approached

universal stage of the process in Rome. As the final document of the second session (approved by Pope Francis and replacing the usual Post-Synodal Exhortation) itself remarks, this dialogical method allowed participants to perceive the presence and voice of God in their midst. Such an approach demonstrates the emerging appreciation of dialogue for the Church *ad intra*. XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Per una Chiesa sinodale: comunione, partecipazione, missione* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), nos. 1, 45, https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2024/10/26/0832/01659.html.

[23] O'Collins, *Revelation*, 77. O'Collins describes a "non-received" revelation as an oxymoron.

as a mere identity marker of the Christian, a seal (complete with a certificate in hand) that guarantees Church membership and access to the other sacraments. Such a static understanding can lend itself too easily to a passivity of the Christian calling.[24] Rather, baptism empowers the Christian for ongoing and active agency within the Church and the world. Every baptised person has the duty to learn and teach, listen and speak. The Church has made significant efforts to receive anew this fundamental insight from Vatican II with the recent synodal process.

The dialogical dynamic between persons of faith in the community has always marked revelation and its recognition as such. One just needs to point to the development of the canon of Scripture and the ongoing outworking of tradition. Not only do these privileged witnesses of revelation demonstrate that hermeneutic discernment has always been needed to hear the voice of God, but they highlight the intersubjective dynamic of revelation. Ecumenical councils, as events, are exemplary word-deeds of revelation through dialogue of "diverse subjectivities" (conciliar members) discerning what God is saying to the Church. Scripture itself is the result of interacting subjects (the authors, the community, and Godself) and then canonised through a conciliar process (the Council of Trent) as authentically revelatory.[25] Tradition develops by means of dialogue, just as the formation of the canon of Scripture emerged from dialogue. Fontinell refers to Scripture, creeds and dogma as "a 'meeting-place' of the continuing and ever-new dialogue between man [sic] and God."[26] God communicates in a special way through Scripture and tradition, but they are also the privileged means by which people of faith respond, not least in the liturgy (prayer). Scripture and tradition are as much *our response* to God, as they are God's communication with us.

God's kenotic gift of love transcends the absolute distance between God and humanity making us true partners in dialogue, while never dissolving the distance, as with every ethical dialogue. Revelation as dialogue widens the concept of faith beyond mere acceptance or obedience, but one's free response that includes our entire being. Understanding revelation as dialogical underscores the continual, relational exchange between God and humanity that can be often interruptive, unpredictable, even formative on both sides of the exchange. From one's personal (and ecclesial) perspective, nonetheless, responsibility is above all else the duty to listen and respond to the divine Other (not to insist on our own priority in the dialogue), and indeed every concrete other since therein can emerge

[24] Pointing to the spiritual-mystical and ethos dimensions of baptism, Jos Moons argues that the sacrament is not a static moment in our personal history that provides us with our "status" in the Church, but it is a dynamic, lifelong journey of conversion in the ecclesial community. See Jos Moons, "Broadening the Baptismal Foundation of a Synodal Church," *Studia Canonica* 58, no. 1 (2024): 131–52, https://doi.org/10.2143/STC.58.1.3293400.

[25] See Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xx.

[26] Eugene Fontinell, *Toward a Reconstruction* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1970), 106, cited in Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 106.

the voice of God. Approaching the other in dialogue is the intentional offering of a listening ear, granting the other a precedence before assuming to speak for them. Embracing the dialogical principle at the heart of revelation has consequences for the Church *ad intra* and not simply the relations between denominational boundaries and those outside the Christian tradition.

Conclusion

If revelation is recognised by faith (active participation in the divine-human dialogue) and animated by love (ethical responsibility), then it can only be sustained by the virtue of hope. Dialogue is not easy. Otherness continually challenges our faith identity and calls us to be ever open to what God might be saying to us. The Christian tradition is a patchwork of such difficult encounters on the way to a deeper understanding of what has been handed down by generations of faith-filled people. Perhaps most demanding of all are the moments when others refuse to dialogue, those who simply do not want to, or when dialogue breaks down. There are possibly many encounters that, on the surface, might look and seem like dialogue, but are in actual fact disguised monologues. In the face of innumerable isolating monologues, the Christian faith summons us to be hopeful witnesses of dialogue, especially in a contemporary context marked by incredible plurality. By avoiding any absolute claim on truth, Christians can respectfully listen to others with a theological humility in the recognition that the dialogue never ends. Christians hold the hope-filled conviction that no matter how difficult it might be to engender genuine dialogue, God never ceases to break through our monologues so that the divine voice can be heard by those willing to listen and respond.

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TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY IN THE WORK OF THE CZECH THEOLOGIAN CTIRAD VÁCLAV POSPÍŠIL (1958–2025)

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Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to present the key features of the Trinitarian theology of Ctirad Václav Pospíšil (1958–2025), a Czech theologian who may be considered the architect of modern Czech dogmatics after the Second Vatican Council and the fall of the Communist regime. The chapter is divided into five parts. Firstly, it provides essential information about Professor Pospíšil's life and theological work. The latter is enormous and multifaceted, encompassing most of the treatises of dogmatic theology. The second part describes the main characteristics of his Trinitarian theology, which is grounded in dialogical personalism. Here, a logical argument for the Trinity is presented. The third part focuses on Pospíšil's original diagram, which explains how the relationships in the Trinity are mirrored in creation. The fourth part is dedicated to practical connections between spirituality and Trinitarian theology. It shows that our false images of God can be healed by entering into sonship or daughtership to the Father in the Son, through the Holy Spirit. For this, Pospíšil uses the word Trinito-therapy. Finally, the conclusion argues that Professor Pospíšil's experience of a totalitarian regime helped him, among other things, understand that the freedom to which a Christian is invited has its deepest roots in the same Trinity.

Keywords: Ctirad Václav Pospíšil; Trinitarian theology; dialogical personalism; Trinitarian structuralism; Trinito-therapy; Czech theology.

Introduction

The Czech Catholic Church, with its specific theology, lived through a unique historical experience during the Communist regime. For this and other reasons, it has something unique to offer to the universal theology of the Church. I would like to make this view concrete by presenting the life and work of Professor Ctirad

Václav Pospíšil. He played an important role in the development of post-Communist Czech theology, enriched by his perspective and experience of the previous era. Before sharing this view, I will briefly describe the context in which the Czech Church and theology found themselves.

During the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia (1948–1989), the Catholic Church was persecuted, and the spiritual and intellectual life of its members was systematically suppressed. Theological faculties, the primary place of theological reflection, were merged into a single institution under regime control and deprived of connections abroad, especially beyond the Iron Curtain. Religious life (as it was understood in religious orders and congregations) was made impossible. Despite this situation, some dared to operate in secret, passing on Christ's life-giving message in a non-official or public manner. These were grouped in different "webs" of the so-called clandestine Church. After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, when the regime collapsed, the Church and theology were able to breathe freely and begin to function. It was necessary to build bridges in two directions: firstly, to connect with the pre-regime Czech theological reflection, and secondly, to make connections with the universal and other local theologies, especially in harmony with the Second Vatican Council. Due to the regime, the spirit of the Council could only take root in limited conditions. More than three decades had passed since the revolution, and the Czech Church was trying to find its place in postmodern society. Today Czech theology has been established and strengthened, building connections with theologians from different countries.

The primary aim of this chapter is to present some of the key thoughts on the Trinitarian theology of C. V. Pospíšil. Firstly, I will outline necessary information about his life and theological work in general. Secondly, I will characterise the Trinitarian theology in his work. Thirdly, I will focus on his diagram of mirroring the Trinity in creation. The fourth part will be dedicated to practical connections between spirituality and Trinitarian theology. The conclusion will summarise Professor Pospíšil's reflection and underline his original contributions.

Pospíšil's Life and Theological Work

Ctirad Václav Pospíšil was born in 1958 in Czechoslovakia. In 1977, he joined the Franciscan order, taking the religious name Václav (Wenceslaus), and, while working in a civil profession, he pursued clandestine studies in philosophy and theology. In 1988, he was clandestinely ordained a priest. During the Communist era, religious orders were not allowed to exist, so he was considered an enemy of the regime, persecuted and interrogated by the secret police. After the Velvet Revolution, Father Václav went to study in Rome. From 1990 to 1995, he completed his licentiate and doctorate at the Antonianum, the Franciscan University in Rome. After returning to his homeland, he started lecturing at different theological faculties. In 1997, he became an associate professor, and in 2002, a professor in dogmatic theology. Over nearly 30 years (1996–2025), he lectured on

dogmatic theology at three Czech Catholic faculties (Olomouc, Prague, České Budějovice) and the Hussite Theological Faculty (Prague). His career ended unexpectedly; he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and died on May 18, 2025.

His work in and for the Czech Church was very diverse. Professor Pospíšil can undoubtedly be described as a brilliant and creative thinker with clear, logical thinking and the ability to connect contexts, which he communicated clearly both in literary form and in his lectures. He was an extremely prolific writer with a masterful command of the Czech language. He is the author of 40 books and 840 articles, reviews and popular texts. They cover, e.g., the dogmatic-theological method, Trinitarian theology, Christology, Mariology, the theology of history, the theology of creation, and the dialogue between theology and the natural sciences (fundamental theology). His monographs on the first three mentioned themes were published repeatedly and serve as study material for students in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Most of his books are written in Czech because he focused on the building and renewal of Czech theology in our country in the post-Communist period. In the international context, Professor Pospíšil was a renowned expert on the texts of St. Bonaventure.

His editorial work includes preparing texts for publication and translating theological and spiritual texts from Italian, Latin, French, and English into Czech. He usually wrote introductory studies and commentaries for these texts. Notably, he translated documents of the International Theological Commission and of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, as well as the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church.

Father Václav was an outstanding teacher who was able to captivate, inspire, but also irritate his students. His lectures can be described as a kind of theatrical performance. To make his points clearer and more memorable, he used neologisms, witty sayings, and stories from real life. Besides theological faculties, he lectured at the Czech Institute of Franciscan Studies and frequently lectured in locations throughout the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as well as at conferences in Italy and Poland. He gave a total of 433 lectures. He sought to popularise specialised topics for the public, which is why he recorded interviews and collaborated on audiovisual educational programs and films. Over a hundred of these were produced.

The volume and quality of his contribution to Czech dogmatic theology are unparalleled in the more than two hundred years of the discipline's existence. He was not just another Czech theologian, but rather the architect and builder of modern Czech dogmatics after the Second Vatican Council and the fall of the Communist regime. His work provides the Czech Church with a backbone, a language, and a systematic foundation on which future generations can rely. He was active in seeking the identity of the Czech Catholic Church amid the changes and challenges of the postmodern world.[1]

[1] See also his necrology: Veronika Řeháková, "Velikán české dogmatické teologie zemřel: nekrolog Ctirada Václava Pospíšila," *Studia theologica* 27, no. 2 (2025): 193–

Trinitarian Theology in C. V. Pospíšil

Professor Pospíšil built his dogmatic theology on dialogical personalism, i.e., on the relational nature of the human person, which is anchored in the relationships between the Persons of the Trinity and, in this sense, is also the image of God. He argued that dialogical anthropocentrism from God's side and dialogical theocentrism from the human side complement each other. In other words, God places the human person first, and the human person answers God's invitation and puts God first. So, there is no opposition between theological anthropocentrism and theocentrism.

Trinitarian theology is the pinnacle of systematic theology,[2] and therefore, all the interconnections between individual dogmatic treatises (*analogy of faith*) find their deepest foundation (*nexus mysteriorum*) here. For this reason, the Trinitarian structure is found not only in Pospíšil's monograph on the mystery of the Holy Trinity, but also in the books on other tractates of dogmatic theology.[3] The book on Trinitarian theology is entitled *On Earth as It Is in Heaven*,[4] a phrase from the Our Father that seeks to emphasise the connection between the image of God on one side and the image of the human being, the Church, and society on the other. It has three parts and covers, firstly, three fundamentals of Trinitarian theology: Is YHWH God the Father, or the entire Trinity?; the practical image of the Triune God; the relationship between the economic and immanent Trinity.[5] The second part of the book deals with the mystery of the Triune God in the Scriptures and in the patristic period.[6] The third further develops Trinitarian reflection. Here, the author also addresses a topic that is often neglected in post-conciliar dogmatics, namely, the common characteristics or properties of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He then goes on to develop the Trinitarian theology of the cross and the theology of the sacraments, as well as addressing the *filioque* issue. The Czech theologian presents an interesting question about the deep connection between the image of God, the organisation of human society, and the theology of the nation.[7]

Professor Pospíšil's reflection on Trinitarian theology is complex, and features some original elements. For example, he argues that YHWH in the Old Testament is both the Father and the Holy Trinity. He also suggests various versions of the

98. Available at: https://www.studiatheologica.eu/artkey/sth-202502-0010_velikan_ceske_dogmaticke_teologie_zemrel_nekrolog_ctirada_vaclava_pospisila.php.

[2] See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 234.

[3] Greatly innovative is Pospíšil's monograph on the Trinitarian theology of creation: Ctirad Václav Pospíšil, *I řekl Bůh: trinitární teologie stvoření* (Praha: Univerzita Karlova – Nakladatelství Karolinum, 2019).

[4] Ctirad Václav Pospíšil, *Jako v nebi, tak i na zemi: náčrt trinitární teologie*, 3rd ed. (Praha: Krystal OP – Karmelitánské nakladatelství), 2017).

[5] Pospíšil, *Jako v nebi, tak i na zemi*, 21–127.

[6] Pospíšil, *Jako v nebi, tak i na zemi*, 128–324.

[7] Pospíšil, *Jako v nebi, tak i na zemi*, 325–571.

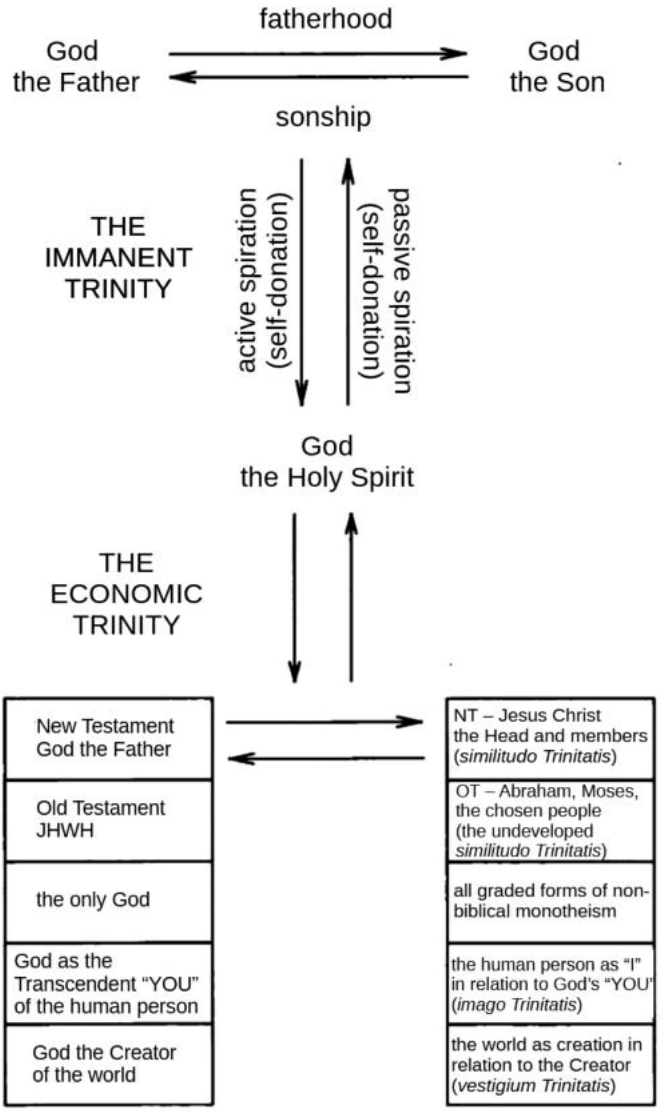
procession of the Holy Spirit based on St. Bonaventure. He presents a logical, straightforward argument for the Trinitarian God, and discusses the problems generated by the so-called one-person monotheism. This will be touched upon in the section on the practical impact of the God image/concept on spirituality. The Czech author developed five diagrams or schemas to illustrate his Trinitarian reflection. Diagram no. 1 is presented in the following section.

Trinitarian Structuralism—Diagram No. 1

The Trinity gives structure to creation—to humanity, other creatures and the cosmos. Diagram no. 1 illustrates the relationships between the eternal Trinity on one side and God's created image and God's presence in the economy of salvation on the other. In the words of the Our Father, this means that "heaven" is mirrored "on earth." It needs to be emphasised that the immanent Trinity is the original, and the economic Trinity with creation is its reflection in a mirror. This mirroring better explains the relationship than, for example, the term prolongation, which was used by some authors in recent centuries.[8]

The image in the mirror depends entirely on the original. Despite its complete independence, the original is truly present in creation through its image. This analogy clearly illustrates the fact that God's transcendence is not incompatible with the immanence of the Trinity in creation and in the history of salvation.

[8] For example, the great German theologian Matthias Joseph Scheeben, in his *Die Mysterien des Christentums* (1st ed. 1865).



To explain the diagram, the upper part depicts the relationships within the Trinity, as fundamentally proposed by St. Augustine: Fatherhood, Sonship, and active and passive "breathing" (*spiration*). Pospíšil adds an alternative term for relating the Holy Spirit as active and passive self-giving (donation), since the Spirit is often seen as the Person-Gift between the Father and the Son.

The Holy Spirit is the bond of perichoretic union between the interiority of the Trinity and its ecstatic form in creation; He is with them, and He is in us. The

Holy Spirit is the One through whom the Trinity reveals and gives Godself in creation, forming a relationship with the created world. It is as if the Holy Spirit were like the surface of the clearest lake in which one can see "heaven" (immanent Trinity) on "earth" (economic Trinity).

The lower part, the mirror image or reflection, means that the economic Trinity is now mirrored in its relationship with creation. The left side (from our perspective) shows the revealed first Person of the Trinity, God the Father, and the reflection on the right shows the incarnate second divine Person, Jesus Christ. This first row represents the fullest revelation of the Trinity and the foundation for all other relationships between the Triune God and creation.

Descending the steps or rows on the right, we can see how individual or collective persons and creation participate in the Son's place within the Trinity and relate to the Father (on the left) through the Holy Spirit (the Bond, the Mirror).

The second row represents the Old Testament era: the relationship between the patriarchs and the chosen people on the one hand and the Lord (YHWH) on the other. The third row expresses other forms of monotheism. The next line shows that every human person is in a relationship with God the Creator. This is the relationship primary to that of other human beings, such as a human mother and father. It is constitutive, not arbitrary. The fifth row expresses that all creation relates to its Creator. Classical scholastic theology used terms for different levels of revealing and "mirroring" God in the created world: vestige of the Trinity for the non-rational creatures, image of the Trinity for human nature, and similitude of the Trinity for human nature raised by grace to the supernatural level.

This diagram clearly summarises that in the Son, in Jesus Christ, through the Spirit, we have a relationship with the divine You (the Father, primary Creator). This "place" in the Trinity means a connection with all three Persons, each of whom has their own role, and a participation in the life of the Trinity. It also means that our communication with God takes place exclusively as our participation in the mystery of the real dialogue between the Father and the Son. God's free interpersonal relationship with the outside world, therefore, necessarily has its real prototype and basis in the truly personal relationships of Fatherhood and Sonship in the immanent Trinity. However, our participation is not something arbitrary, which would again be contrary to God's transcendence over the world, but is God's free self-giving.

The diagram concerns not only dogmatic theology but also theological anthropology, morality, and spirituality, as will be described in the next section.

"Trinito-therapy"—Trinitarian Theology Reflected in Spirituality and Morality

The prerequisite for healthy spirituality and a healthy relationship with God is good theology, which serves as a guide on a conscious and rational level. Such theology must be related to practice; specifically, it must "illuminate as clearly as

possible the inner connection between the mystery of the Trinity and everyday life."[9] That is to say, good theology is primarily Trinitarian. The old argument that we cannot explain the Triune God is no longer defensible. The logical argument for God as a relational being is clear and straightforward. If there were one God with no relationship in Himself, the world would add something essential to Him, namely, relationship and relationality.

The common denominator of unhealthy, false images of God, their caricatures, is a single-person image of God, which in a way implicitly dominated dogmatic theology and, by extension, spirituality and morality in the 19th century and well into the 20th century. The concept of God as a monarch ruling over the world corresponded to the monarchical model of secular government advocated by the Church, a strongly clericalized, hierarchical model of the Catholic Church with the pope at its apex, emphasised by the proclamation of the dogma of papal infallibility in matters of faith and morals and the exercise of the primacy in the discipline and governance of the Church,[10] as well as the patriarchal model of the family promoted by the Church. These preferred social models retroactively petrified and reinforced the image of God as a single person.

Although in contemporary, post-conciliar systematic theology, the gradually "forgotten Trinity" is regaining its central place and the image of God as "eternal solitude" that bends toward the world is considered indefensible. In lived spirituality, various models of that outdated image of God are deeply rooted and continue to influence the lives of many believers and even so-called non-believers who do not accept such a thing. The false images of God have their roots in our childhood, in the relationships with primary persons, relationships that are necessarily imperfect and burdened by human brokenness.[11]

Now we will use the so-called social theory (analogy), whose roots are found in St. Augustine's *De Trinitate*. Again, we shall see the reflection "on earth as it is in heaven." The Holy Trinity as a community of mutually loving persons reaching out to one another must be the key to understanding the human person, the human community, and humanity. While the image of a single-person monarch ruling over everything required unity, uniformity, and submissive obedience from servants and subjects of God, the Trinity anchors diversity in unity and unity in diversity, which must be reflected in a human community, where everyone is to "bear fruit according to their kind,"[12] and to grow in uniqueness. We may ask

[9] Pospíšil, *Jako v nebi, tak i na zemi*, 20.

[10] First Vatican Council, *Pastor aeternus* (July 18, 1870), chaps. 3–4, in Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, *Trent to Vatican II* (London: Sheed & Ward; Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 813–816.

[11] Karl Frielingsdorf, *Dämonische Gottesbilder: Ihre Entstehung, Entlarvung und Überwindung* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1992).

[12] Nicolas Barré, "Maximes pour la direction des âmes," 41, in Nicolas Barré, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1994), 363.

how the Trinitarian image of community and the individual corresponds to contemporary practice. To what extent is creative co-creation of community emphasised in the formation of religious, priests, and laity, rather than growth into existing structures? To what extent does the accepted morality still prevail in the perception of the originality of each human person with their story and life circumstances, emphasising their free discernment in conscience instead of the tendency to standardise, unify the same requirements for everyone, and the resulting judgment? To what extent does spirituality help Christians to live a quality life instead of merely eking out an existence, surviving in greater or lesser degrees of bondage and fear?

Good theology is liberating: the Trinity is a wonderful model of freedom, not blind or slavish obedience, which of course does not mean rejecting filial and creative obedience (Gal 4:4–7). In the Trinity, the highest conceivable freedom from oneself and the freedom to give oneself to another are realised, not only between the divine persons, but also towards creation. This calls for a free response to God's self-giving and for a graded responsibility for the running of the world and participation in its co-creation. Therefore, God is not a monarch solely responsible for everything that happens in the world, including human evil deeds. Similarly, the understanding of God's will must be transformed. It does not mean a dictate, a command coming from above, or the inscrutable whim of the supreme ruler, but God's desire or intention, which individuals and communities, to the extent of their freedom, strive to understand and respond to. In this, we can follow in the footsteps of our Lord and brother, Jesus Christ, who was obedient to the Father in the Holy Spirit while remaining true to himself. Where the Father himself is "the command" for the son or daughter (e.g., Mt 5:48), it cannot be otherwise, because through this obedience, that is, by imitating the Father, we attain the highest realisation of our own humanity. Therefore, every person is called to freedom in order to grow in fidelity to him/herself. Those who follow Jesus Christ, the perfect human being, do not alienate themselves from themselves, but, on the contrary, become more themselves.

And what is the true image of a person according to the Trinitarian model? A human person is defined as relational: first and foremost, as a son or daughter of the heavenly Father, according to the analogy of the Sonship of the second divine person, and then as existing in interpersonal relationships. It is extremely important, however, that it is precisely their anchoring in participation in eternal Sonship that makes them ontologically independent in interpersonal relationships and subsequently helps them to cope with shocks on a spiritual and even psychological level. Good theology is Trinito-therapy that can reveal and unmask degrading forms of human being in relation to God: a servant or slave who hides from God out of fear, who sees, judges, and calculates everything; the so-called righteous person who, through effort, perfectionism, and performance, must

prove that they deserve God's love and salvation; a soldier who shows unconditional obedience and fulfils tasks that may include the merciless suppression of those who perceive things differently.

Conclusion

This chapter presents key features of Trinitarian theology in the work of the Czech theologian Ctirad Václav Pospíšil. Dialogical personalism stresses the relationality of both the divine and human persons. A logical argument for God as a relational being has been presented.

The phrase "on earth as it is in heaven" underlines the connection between God in Godself and creation and the realities of our world. Pospíšil's original diagram can help us understand the relationships within the Trinity and between the Trinity and creation. It shows how the divine relationships are mirrored "on earth." This mirroring means that the eternal, immanent Trinity is the archetypal foundation on which the economic Trinity depends. The diagram explains the role of each divine person. The Holy Spirit is the "nexus," "canal," or mirror that enables us to relate to the Father, which is possible only as participation in Jesus Christ. It also shows different modes of relating to God—the Jewish nation, Christians, Muslims, any human person and other creatures.

Professor Pospíšil stressed the practical side of dogmatic theology. In his books and talks, he always made it relevant to spirituality and morality. The Trinitarian way of thinking, if put into practice, can become a Trinito-therapy that assists in growing into greater freedom and a richer way of living life (see John 10:10). His life experience of an oppressive Communist regime made him sensitive to any hint of ideology, and we can see his emphasis on human freedom that is guaranteed by and anchored in freedom in the Trinity.

The present reflection offers just one angle on the enormous work of Pospíšil. The future will reveal whether this Czech theologian can be considered the most influential and, at the same time, the most original Czech systematic theologian since the 19th century.

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FEMALE IMAGES FOR GOD:

ON THE INTERTEXTUALITY BETWEEN PSALM 2 AND THE NICENE-CONSTANTINOPOLITAN CREED

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Abstract

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed contains several intertextual references to biblical texts. The reference to 1 Corinthians 15:3, 4 is perhaps the best-known due to its literal inclusion in the Creed. In this contribution, however, I would like to draw attention to the intertextual reference to Psalm 2:7. This psalm contains the image of God giving birth to the new king, an image often masculinized by translating "to beget" rather than "to give birth." The image of God giving birth is used in the Creed to express what we believe in regarding God the Father. This female image also plays a role in the liturgy of Christmas Eve.

Keywords: Psalm 2; the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed; gender; images of God.

Introduction

This year, 2025, is a very special year. We are celebrating the seventeenth centenary of Nicaea I, the first ecumenical council, which was held in 325, and at which the text of our Creed was laid down in its basic form. The text was finalised at the Council of Constantinople in 381. If there is anything important for the future of the Church and for doing theology, then it is the text of our Creed,[1] which is currently in the spotlight due to the commemoration of this centenary.

[1] See e.g. Thomas G. Weinandy, "The Doctrinal Significance of the Councils of Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon," in *The Unity of Faith: Essays for the Building Up of the Body of Christ*, ed. Thomas G. Weinandy (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2024), 160–82.

In this presentation, I wish to draw attention, from a synchronic perspective, to the intertextuality between the text of the Bible and the text of the Creed, with special attention to Psalm 2:7. Doing so, I wish to focus on female images for God found not only in biblical texts, but also in our theological tradition, in this case a female image for God implicitly present in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

A Scriptural Quotation in the Creed

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed contains one literal quotation from the Bible. The expression κατὰ τὰς γραφάς, *secundum Scripturas*, *according to the Scriptures*, is from 1 Corinthians 15, where it is used twice, namely in verses 3 and 4. In this passage, Paul succinctly explains what the Good News, the Gospel, that he is proclaiming, is about. Paul received the Good News via tradition and he is now delivering it to the Corinthians. Two elements, which together form a single whole, lie at the core of this Good News: Jesus Christ died for us and Jesus Christ rose from the dead for us. Paul describes both elements by using the expression *according to the Scriptures*. The Scriptures, which were for Paul what we now call the Old Testament, already testify to the death and resurrection of Christ, as Paul explains. The tradition in which Paul stands and which he is continuing, is confirmed by the testimony of the Scriptures.[2]

This position of the Scriptures in Paul's Letter to the Corinthians is comparable to the function of the סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה *Book of the Law* or the סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית *Book of the Covenant* and similar expressions in the Hebrew Bible.[3] In Exodus 24:7, Moses uses the Book of the Covenant for the first time, when he reads it to the people during the rite of making the covenant. This Book of the Covenant has the primary function of being an עֵד *witness* for the people. A witness to the benefit of the people, in their observance of the Torah, or a witness against the people, in their neglect of the Torah. For this reason, Moses places the Book of the Torah next to the Ark of the Covenant in Deuteronomy 31:26.

Quoting 1 Corinthians 15:3, 4 in the Creed has great theological significance. Through this quotation it becomes clear that the Creed must be understood as the

[2] See e.g. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians* (The Anchor Bible 32; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 541–42; see also Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen, "Tekst, Taal, Woord: Een Bijbelwetenschappelijk Perspectief," in *Taal waarin wij God verstaan: Over taal en vertaling van Schrift en traditie in de liturgie*, ed. Gerard Rouwhorst and Petra Versnel-Mergaerts (Heeswijk: Berne Media, 2015), 29–44; Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen, *The Seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church: A Fresh Biblical Perspective* (Tilburg Theological Studies 9; Zürich: Lit Verlag, 2022), 25.

[3] Edgar W. Conrad, "Heard but Not Seen: The Representation of 'Books' in the Old Testament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 54 (1992): 45–59; see also Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen, "Writing and (Not) Reading the Torah (and Contrasting Texts) in the Book of Isaiah," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 44 (2019): 1–11.

continuation of the tradition, the handing down of the faith, which already commences in the Scriptures of the Old Testament and was made explicit by Paul in his preaching among the nations.

Moreover, it also makes clear which position the Scriptures should take in doing theology. The Creed clarifies that we believe in one God, who is: Father and Son and Holy Spirit. In the wake of particularly the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Creed speaks about the Church. The Church is not an object of faith, but mediates as a primordial sacrament the object of faith, i.e. the one God. In the Latin translation of the Creed this becomes clear through its use of the verb *credere in*, *to believe in*, *to trust in*, for God, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, and *credere* with a direct accusative, *to believe*, *to trust*, for the Church.[4] Thus, the Bible, the Scriptures are not an object of faith; the Bible, the Scriptures form the testimony of the validity of the faith in the one God, Father and Son and Holy Spirit. In other words, we do not believe in the Bible, but the Bible testifies to what we believe in.

Psalm 2

In addition to this quote, allusions to the Scriptures can be found in the Creed. In this context, I would like to look at Psalm 2:7.[5] The text of this Psalm is about the relationship between God and his Son and it is alluded to in the Creed regarding the relationship between God the Father and God the Son.

Psalm 2 is a so-called "royal psalm." In this psalm a new king is enthroned in Jerusalem. The nations have no chance to rebel, even if they thought they could abuse the possible power vacuum created by the succession to the throne, which often occurred in ancient times when the old king died and a new king had to take over. There is no opportunity for rebellion because the new king has been placed upon his throne by the Lord. The Lord therefore says to those possibly rebellious nations: *I have enthroned my King on my holy mountain Zion!* (verse 6).

Next, in verse 7, the enthroned King himself speaks and confirms the Lord's decision by letting this decision sound as an embedded direct speech. The text of verse 7 reads as follows:

7a+7b	אֲסַפְּרָה אֶל חֹק יְהוָה	אָמַר אֵלַי
7c+7d	בְּנִי אַתָּה	אֲנִי הַיּוֹם יְלִדְתִּיךָּ

[4] See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (second *editio typica*, 1997; English translation, 2000), § 750.

[5] See also: Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen, "Transformative Poetry: A General Introduction and a Case Study of Psalm 2," *Perichoresis* 14 (2016): 3–20.

In verses 7a–b, the verbs ספר *to make known* and אמר *to say* are parallel, reinforced by the noun חק *decree* in verse 7a. In verses 7c–d, the noun בֵּן *son* and the verb ילד are parallel.

The verb ילד requires extra attention. The standard meaning of ילד is *to give birth*.[6] This also fits perfectly in the syntactic and semantic context of verse 7. Verse 7d forms a performative clause. In Biblical Hebrew, performative actions are expressed with a *qatal*-form in the first person, a second person as beneficiary, and a deictic element.[7] In verse 7d there is an explicit first person in the separate personal pronoun אֲנִי *I*. The second person is present in the suffix second person masculine singular of the verbal form יְלִדְתִּיךָ. The verb ילד is in the *qatal*-tense. The deictic element is הַיּוֹם *today*. Semantically the psalm is about a king who is enthroned not in the past, but now, הַיּוֹם *this very day, today*, for everyone to see, even for those rebellious nations.

Looking at the English Bible translations, the standard translation of ילד with *to give birth* does not appear. Instead of opting for the female act *to give birth*, these translations opt for a male act.

In most cases the translation *to beget* is used. For example, in the King James Version, the New King James Version, the American Standard Version, the New American Bible, the Amplified Bible, the JPS Tanakh, and also in Smith's Literal Translation (which is, therefore, not as literal as the title of this Bible translation suggests). The semantic problem is of course that, if the son were to be conceived today as a new king, there would still have to be a nine-month wait until he is born, and thus be visibly present, whereas the psalm makes his presence, i.e. his visibility, clear by referring to the royal enthronement.

Modern translations, especially those using so-called "simple language," use the translation *to become your father* (with or without a capital letter "f") for ילד. For example: the New International Version, the New Living Translation, and the Good News Translation. The New American Standard Bible uses the verb *to father* as a translation of the verb ילד. By using such a translation, the problem is exacerbated because of the introduction of not only a male activity, but also of the concept of "father." The word אָב *father* does not appear in Psalm 2. The king is בֵּן *son*, but the Lord is not referred to with the male concept of "father."[8]

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[6] This also applies to Julius Kühlewein, "ילד *jld* gebären," in *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 1 (1978): c. 731–36, who, however, switches to the translation *zeugen* instead of *gebären* when it comes to the Lord. However, Dieter Böhler, *Psalmen 1–50* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament; Freiburg: Herder, 2021), 79, 86, translates *ich, heute, hiermit gebäre ich dich*, although he interprets this expression as from a father perspective.

[7] E.g. Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, translated and revised by Takamitsu Muraoka (Subsidia Biblica 14; Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1991), 362 [§ 112f].

[8] This fits into the general tendency of the Old Testament, in contrast to the religions of the Ancient Near East in which male (main) gods are regularly addressed as father, to be reluctant to call the Lord "father"; see Ernst Jenni, "אָב *'āb* Vater," in *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 1 (1978): c. 14.

I suppose that some translations have seen the problem related to the translation *to beget*, but have shied away from using the female act *to give birth* for the Lord. They have chosen to translate ילד as *to bring forth*. For example: Young's Literal Translation and the Literal Standard Version (which are, therefore, not as literal as the respective titles of these Bible translations suggest).

Regarding the Dutch Bible translations, we can observe the same. The most common translation is *verwekken* (to beget). The *Bijbel in Gewone Taal* (Bible in Plain Language) translates: *vanaf vandaag ben ik jouw vader* (as from today I am your father). The *Statenvertaling* reads: *heden heb Ik U gegenereerd* (today I have generated you). However, it is striking that the *Herziene Statenvertaling* (Revised Statenvertaling) instead reads: *heden heb Ik U verwekt* (today I have begotten you).

In the Septuagint, we can already see the shift from a female act to a male act regarding the translation of ילד. The Septuagint reads: ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκά σε. The verb γεννάω standardly means *to beget* and is used specifically for the father, while for the mother the verb τίκτω *to give birth* is standard. The Vulgate, by the way, reads: *ego hodie genui te*. The Latin verb *gignere* can mean both *to beget* and *to give birth*.

Female Images for God

Male images for God are dominant in the Hebrew Bible. God is a מֶלֶךְ, *a king*. For example, in Psalm 5:3, where God is called "king" for the first time in the Psalter. God is also referred to as אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה, *a man of war*, as in Exodus 15:3. The epithet צְבָאוֹת *hosts* is related to this.[9] The Lord is a God of Armies, of hosts. Often both indications are combined, as in Psalm 24:10: יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת הוּא מֶלֶךְ הַכָּבוֹד *the Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory*.

The fact that male images are often used for God does not mean that every possible male image is used. For example, God is never called *husband*. Not even when Zion is presented as God's wife. In Isaiah 49:14, Zion considers herself to be abandoned, husbandless, which the Lord denies, however without indicating himself as being a husband.[10]

[9] See e.g. Adam S. van der Woude, "צָבָא *ṣābā'* Heer," in *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 2 (1979): c. 502–7.

[10] Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen, *The Reader-Oriented Unity of the Book Isaiah* (Amsterdamse Cahiers voor Exegese van de Bijbel en zijn Tradities Supplement Series 6; Vught: Skandalon, 2006), 158–67; see also John J. Schmitt, "The Motherhood of God and Zion as Mother," *Revue Biblique* 92 (1985): 557–69.

Although male images are dominant, this does not mean that female images are not used for God.[11] Perhaps this is more often the case than is thought in our contemporary society…[12]

In Isaiah 42:14, God is depicted as giving birth: כַּיּוֹלֵדָה אֶפְעֶה *as someone giving birth (as someone in labour) I cry out*.[13] God groans so hard during labour that the whole world suffers. Maternal terms also appear after 42:14 in chapters 40–66, the second part of the book of Isaiah. In 46:3, the care for Israel from the womb onwards is referred to as God's care. The text avoids using a possessive suffix with the words בֶּטֶן *belly* and רֶחֶם *intestines*, *womb*, *uterus*, but nevertheless clearly uses a mother image for God.[14] This imagery is continued in Isaiah 49:15, where God directly addresses Zion stating that a mother cannot forget her child, and even if that were the case, then it certainly applies to God that he cannot forget Zion.[15] Finally, in Isaiah 66:13, in a direct speech, God says that he will comfort as a mother comforts her child.[16]

The image of giving birth in relation to God also appears in the Torah: Deuteronomy 32:18 צוּר יְלָדְךָ *the rock that gave birth to you*.[17] In the New Testament this image is adopted in relation to every believer. 1 John 4:7 reads: καὶ πᾶς ὁ ἀγαπῶν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται *and everyone who loves is born of God*.[18] This issue is also present in the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3:3–8, 16, expressed with the construction γεννάω ἄνωθεν, *to be born again*. In my view, due to John 2:23, this dialogue takes place during the night of Pesach, which makes the re-birth even more important. John 1:12[19] expresses a similar idea, but

[11] There are many publications on this topic. See already e.g. Arthur E. Zannoni, "Feminine Languaging in the Hebrew Scriptures," *Shofar* 2 (1984): 5–17; Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Female Language for God: Should the Church Adopt It?" *Transformation* 4 (1987): 24–28.

[12] See e.g. Hanne Løland Levinson, "The Never-Ending Search for God's Feminine Side: Feminine Aspects in the God-Image of the Prophets," in *Prophecy and Gender in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. L. Juliana Claassens and Irmtraud Fischer (Bible and Women 1/2; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2021), 393–409.

[13] In the Jewish tradition, Isaiah 42:5–43:10 is the haftara-reading to Genesis 1:1–6:9.

[14] See e.g. Ulrich Berges, *Jesaja 40–48* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament; Freiburg: Herder, 2008), 456–57.

[15] See e.g. Willem A. M. Beuken, *Jesaja 49–54* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament; Freiburg: Herder, 2015), 57–58.

[16] See e.g. Ulrich Berges, *Jesaja 55–66* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament; Freiburg: Herder, 2022), 641.

[17] See also Numeri 11:12.

[18] See Michael Peppard, "Adopted and Begotten Sons of God: Paul and John on Divine Sonship," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73 (2011): 92–110; Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (Word Biblical Commentary 51; Dallas: Word, 1991), 238, who entirely neglects the aspect of being born of God.

[19] See Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (The Anchor Bible 29; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 29, who understands becoming children of God as being begotten from above by the Spirit of Jesus. For John 1:18, see also Alicia D. Myers, "In the Father's Bosom: Breastfeeding and Identity Formation in John's Gospel," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 76 (2014): 481–97.

uses the verb γίνομαι, the basic meaning of which is *to come into existence*, *to cause to be*, which is "gender neutral," so to say, and which developed into the meaning *to be born*.[20] In the Septuagint, this verb is also often used as a translation for the Biblical Hebrew verb ילד.

Psalm 131 also uses a feminine image for God. The psalmist describes his relationship with God as the relationship between a weaned and quiet child and its mother. By the way, the verb דמה *to be quiet* is not used here without humour: a weaned child is not quiet at all, because it would prefer to be breastfed again, but is quietened by a pacifier, a fake nipple.[21]

The idea of hypostases around God developed in (late) Hellenistic Judaism.[22] Especially the feminine characteristics of God become hypostases. In this way תּוֹרָה the *Torah*, the *Nomos*, the *Law*, חָכְמָה *Wisdom*,[23] קוֹל the *Voice*,[24] and the post-biblical שְׁכִינָה, the *Dwelling Presence* of God in our world,[25] developed into hypostases, which, while being beneath God (as the word "hypostasis" indicates), do exist from eternity. Wisdom 1:6–7; 6:22–25 should especially be mentioned here, perhaps prepared by Proverbs 1:20–22; 8:1–9:6.[26] In Greek-speaking Judaism the λόγος, the *Word*, the *Logos*, also developed into a hypostasis.

On the one hand, these "feminine" hypostases can only arise because God already has these feminine aspects within himself, while on the other hand, in an indirect way, they also make God more "masculine."

Psalm 2 in the New Testament

In the New Testament, Psalm 2:7 is quoted in the Letter to the Hebrews.[27] Right at the beginning, in 1:5, this psalm quote appears to indicate the event of salvation in Jesus Christ: Τίνι γὰρ εἶπέν ποτε τῶν ἀγγέλων Υἱός μου εἶ σύ ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκά σε *for to which angel did he [= God] ever say, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you?"*[28] The Letter to the Hebrews wishes to focus on Jesus as a

[20] See already Friedrich Büchsel, "μονογενής," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* 4 (1942), 746.

[21] Harm van Grol, "Psalm 131, een labyrint van verlangens," in *Gelukkig de mens: Opstellen over Psalmen, exegese en semiotiek aangeboden aan Nico Tromp*, ed. Pancratius Beentjes, Jacques Maas and Tamis Wever (Kampen: Kok, s.a.), 62–73.

[22] See also Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "Origen, Greek Philosophy, and the Birth of the Trinitarian Meaning of Hypostasis," *The Harvard Theological Review* 105 (2012): 302–50.

[23] See also Genesis Rabbah 1:1, 4.

[24] Azzan Yadin, "קול as Hypostasis in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 (2003): 601–26.

[25] Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1961), 229.

[26] See also Michael V. Fox, "Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116 (1997): 626–27; Julia Schwartzmann, "Gender Concepts of Medieval Jewish Thinkers and the Book of Proverbs," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 7 (2000): 185, 191.

[27] See also Erich Grässer, *An die Hebräer* (Evangelisch-Katholische Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 17/1; Zürich: Benziger, 1990), 71–76.

[28] See also Eckart Otto, "Hermeneutics of Biblical Theology, History of Religion and

son. The proper name Jesus, therefore, only appears for the first time in the Letter to the Hebrews in 2:9, but the title υἱός *son* is used from the beginning. Jesus' sonship is special, which makes him greater than the prophets and the angels. In Psalm 2, בֵּן *son* is also a special designation. The word מֶלֶךְ *king* is used for both the leader in Jerusalem (verse 6a) and the chained leaders of the nations (verses 2a and 10a), but the word בֵּן *son* is only used for the new King in Jerusalem.
Jesus has received this sonship from God. The verb γεννάω in Hebrews 1:5 repeats the Biblical Hebrew verb ילד used in Psalm 2:7. In Psalm 2, the birth stands for the sonship of the king appointed by God in Jerusalem, while in the Letter to the Hebrews the birth is interpreted as the resurrection, or the new life, that Jesus received from God in Jerusalem and on the basis of which he was also appointed by God as son.[29]

In Hebrews 5:5, this quote from Psalm 2:7 appears again. Once more, sonship and birth are linked to the resurrection of Jesus. The repetition of the quote emphasises its importance.

In a similar context concerning the resurrection, Psalm 2 also appears as a quotation in Acts 13:33.[30] Paul gives a speech in the synagogue in Perga on the Sabbath and explains the resurrection of Jesus using, among other texts, Psalm 2.[31]

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

An intertextual relationship can be identified between Psalm 2:7 and the text of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. This is found in the credal formula: τὸν ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς γεννηθέντα πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων. Although the Greek verb γεννάω can mean *to beget*, this meaning is excluded here. God the Father does not beget God the Son, nor is the Son begotten by the Father, because then a third party would be involved. That a third party is not involved is in a way also articulated in the expression οὐ ποιηθέντα, directly following the repeated expression γεννηθέντα, in the next line of the Creed. The verb γεννάω must therefore mean *to give birth* and in the passive *to be born*. In Latin, the text reads: *et ex Patre natum ante omnia saecula*.

In this context, I would also like to briefly touch upon the expression μονογενής, which is used to further characterise ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, *the Son of God*,

Theological Substance of Two Testaments: The Reception of Psalms in Hebrew," in *Psalms and Hebrews: Studies in Reception*, ed. Dirk J. Human and Gert J. Steyn (Library of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies 527; London: T & T Clark, 2010), especially 22–26.

[29] Resurrection and birth are often linked in New Testament texts, see e.g. John 3:1–21; resurrection and birth are also connected to baptism in New Testament texts, see e.g. Acts 2:38.

[30] Rudolf Pesch, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Evangelisch-Katholische Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 5/2; Zürich: Benziger, 1986), 38.

[31] The expression πρωτότοκος *first-born* is often used in relation to the resurrection: Rom 8:29; Col 1:15, 18; Heb 1:6; 11:28; 12:23; Rev 1:5.

at his first mention in the Creed. As I have already indicated, the verb γίνομαι is "gender-neutral." It does not primarily specify the male act of begetting or the female act of giving birth.[32] In the translation traditions we see that the word μονογενής is often translated in English as *only-begotten*,[33] while in Dutch it is often translated as *eengeboren*, *only-born*. However, the word μονογενής primarily indicates the unique position of the person in question. In Luke 7:12, the young man of Nain is called μονογενής, because he is the only child of his mother. In Hebrews 11:17, Isaac is called μονογενής, not because he is the only son of his father Abraham (who also begot Ishmael, as well as six more sons), but because he is the unique son through whom the promises of God will be continued.[34] In the Latin translation, the confusing ambiguity of begetting and being born has been removed by translating with *unigenitus*. Some Latin Church Fathers, however, use *unigenus*, which is in fact a more literal translation of μονογενής.[35]

It is also remarkable that in the formulation by the Creed of the incarnation, namely "from the Virgin Mary" and "through the Holy Spirit," all words regarding begetting and giving birth are absent. It is only the expression σαρκωθέντα, in Latin *incarnatus est*, that is used.[36]

Because God the Son is born of God the Father, the implication is that the Father gives birth to the Son, a female image used for God that is intertextually linked to Psalm 2:7.

Psalm 2 in the Celebration of Christmas Eve

Psalm 2 is sung in the Roman liturgy as the Introit of the midnight celebration of the Eucharist for Christmas.[37] The antiphon is formed by verse 7: *Dominus dixit ad me: Filius meus es tu, ego hodie genui te*. In the context of Christmas,

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[32] *Pace*: Maarten J. J. Menken, "Born of God or Begotten by God? A Translation Problem in the Johannine Writings," *Novum Testamentum* 51 (2009): 352–68, who only appeals to the ancient Greek world to argue for "Only-Begotten," and does not include the world of the Septuagint, among others, in his considerations.

[33] See also Dale Moody, "God's Only Son: The Translation of John 3:16 in the Revised Standard Version," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 72 (1953): 213–19.

[34] Grässer, *An die Hebräer*, 146.

[35] E.g. Paulinus of Nola, *Carmina* 5:46; see Büchsel, "μονογενής," 746.

[36] It is remarkable that the 2001 document *Notification "Dupuis"* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith formulates the Incarnation somewhat sloppily: "It must be firmly believed that Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, crucified and risen, is the sole and universal mediator of salvation for all humanity." https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20010124_dupuis_en.html. The Son of God is not made man, but becomes incarnate.

[37] Hansjörg Auf der Maur, *Feiern im Rhythmus der Zeit I: Herrenfeste in Woche und Jahr* (Gottesdienst der Kirche Handbuch der Liturgiewissenschaft 5; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1983), 169–71.

the solemnity of the birth of the Lord, Psalm 2 is thus not only linked to Jesus Christ, but is linked especially to his birth. The birth mentioned in verse 7 is parallelised with the birth of Jesus, the new King.

It is remarkable that the antiphon does not start with verse 7c, but with verse 7b. The first-person character is therefore the speaking authority, not God. This gives a special effect: the newborn is presented as speaking. In the context of Christmas, this represents the fullness of the incarnation of God the Son: the incarnation is so real that this person can be presented as actually speaking. This also makes it clear that it is not the romantic birth of a baby that is central in the Christmas celebration—after all, a baby cannot yet speak—but the salvific action of God in this new-born human being.

The development of the Christmas liturgy according to the Roman rite is of a later date than the text of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed from 381. That is why I am of the opinion that using Psalm 2 in the Christmas Eve liturgy not only evokes the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, but is also about the birth of God the Son from all eternity from God the Father.

Conclusion

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the centenary of which we are commemorating this year, is a very special text. It stands within a web of intertextual relationships with all kinds of biblical texts. One of these is Psalm 2:7, which uses a female image for God. Through this intertextual relationship, a female image is, albeit implicitly, laid down in the confession of our faith in God the Father.[38]

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FROM SILENCE TO SURVIVAL:

BATHSHEBA, FEMINIST AND WOMANIST HERMENEUTICS, AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN CHRISTIANITY

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Abstract

This chapter examines the narrative of Bathsheba across 2 Samuel 11–12 and 1 Kings 1–2 through feminist and womanist hermeneutics. It asks how these interpretive approaches might contribute to the renewal of European Christianity in the context of institutional sexual abuse, survivor testimony, and ecclesial practices of silence. Beginning with a narrative-critical analysis, this chapter considers how the biblical text distributes speech, silence, characterization, and narrative attention between David and Bathsheba. While David's actions, repentance, and theological significance dominate much of the narrative, Bathsheba's experience remains largely unvoiced, creating interpretive gaps that have frequently been filled by hegemonic traditions in ways that minimize coercive power or imply female complicity. Drawing particularly on J. Cheryl Exum, Sara M. Koenig, Wilda C. Gafney, Phyllis Trible, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, this chapter argues that feminist and womanist readings disrupt this interpretive trajectory. Feminist hermeneutics exposes the gendered structures of power surrounding Bathsheba's silencing and challenges interpretations that centre David's repentance at the expense of her suffering. Womanist hermeneutics further develops this critique through reparative and imaginative practices that restore dignity, voice, survival, and constrained agency to women marginalized within biblical narratives. Bathsheba's movement from near-silence and objectification in 2 Samuel to speech, political activity, and royal authority in 1 Kings provides a significant theological pattern of survival and re-emergence. This chapter argues that, within contemporary European Christianity, such re-readings can contribute to an ethics of interpretation centred on listening, accountability, and justice. Reading Bathsheba after ecclesial abuse therefore becomes more than an exercise in biblical reinterpretation: it offers a model of theological and ecclesial repair in

which silenced experience is acknowledged and survivor-centred reading becomes a practice of transformation.

Keywords: Bathsheba; biblical hermeneutics; feminist hermeneutics; womanist hermeneutics; sexual violence; survivor-centred theology; European Christianity.

Introduction

Christianity in Europe is undergoing a moral and theological re-evaluation in the wake of survivor testimony, public inquiries, and institutional reports that have disclosed patterns of sexual abuse and long-standing practices of concealment. In this context, questions of authority, accountability, and the formation of moral imagination are no longer optional. They are structural concerns for ecclesial life. Scripture, read aloud in worship, taught in catechesis, and utilized in public discourse, participates in this formation. It is worth noting that Scripture is not neutral, and neither are the interpretive habits that we as readers bring to it. Feminist and womanist scholars have argued that biblical narratives can normalize patriarchal power through what they emphasize, what they omit, and how they train readers to sympathize with certain figures over others.[1] Bathsheba's story, told across 2 Samuel 11–12 and 1 Kings 1–2, offers a concentrated site for examining these interpretive dynamics. Traditional or hegemonic readings have frequently centered David's moral failure and repentance, treating Bathsheba as a narrative device within his theological drama. This results in a familiar trajectory: David sins, he is confronted by the prophet Nathan, he repents, and finally he is forgiven. However, while all this occurs for David, Bathsheba's experience remains largely unvoiced. Feminist and womanist hermeneutics challenge this legacy by attending to narrative gaps, naming coercive power, and recovering Bathsheba's survival and later agency.[2] In this chapter I will argue that feminist and womanist readings of Bathsheba provide critical resources for a European Christianity in what may be described as a mode of "trauma recovery," not only because they expose textual and interpretive violence, but because they model practices of ethical reading. These approaches, exemplified in the work of J. Cheryl Exum, Sara M. Koenig, and Wilda C. Gafney, pay attention to silenced voices in the narrative, question the theological primacy of perpetrator-centered repentance, and invite a form of interpretive accountability that can serve ecclesial repair.[3]

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[1] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 1–5.

[2] J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 1–9.

[3] See Sara M. Koenig, *Bathsheba Survives* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2018), 1–4, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv6mtf4t; Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 21–27.

Narrative Critical Analysis: Silence, Gaps, and the Shape of the Story

A narrative-critical reading sheds light on how Bathsheba's story produces meaning through both speech and silence. Biblical narrators provide selective access to events, motives, and interiority. It is when that access is restricted, gaps begin to appear in the text. It is these gaps that invite readers to infer what is missing.[4] In 2 Samuel 11, the narrative moves swiftly through Bathsheba's summoning, the sexual encounter, and the report of pregnancy. Bathsheba's inner world is largely inaccessible. Her sole recorded speech-act is the message "I am pregnant" (2 Samuel 11:5). This verse functions primarily to propel David's subsequent actions. The narrative, by contrast, lingers over David's strategizing, his manipulation of Uriah, and the moral exposure that arrives with Nathan's confrontation. This uneven distribution of narrative attention shapes how we read the text. Time is expanded around David's crisis and compressed around Bathsheba's experience, shaping reader sympathy and theological focus. Plot structure reinforces this imbalance. The 2 Samuel sequence moves from David's desire, and his abuse of royal power, to a climax in the prophet Nathan's rebuke, to a resolution in David's confession and divine forgiveness. Nathan's parable, which is a "story within a story,"[5] functions as an embedded moral mirror that forces David, as well as the reader, to recognize injustice. However, it appears that this resolution is incomplete. Bathsheba does not receive narrative justice. The death of her first child, which has been framed as divine punishment, becomes the narrative's closure. This becomes problematic as the narrative has refused to allow the reader insight into Bathsheba's suffering. Bathsheba has no voice, and no attempt has been made to make amends for her suffering. Spatial and setting dynamics within the narrative highlight the importance of the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. David's palace is the space of surveillance and command, where he sees Bathsheba, summons her, and later moves her into his home. The spatial logic aligns with royal possession: her body is pulled into the king's private sphere. However, in 1 Kings, spatial relations shift. It is Bathsheba who enters David's chamber with purpose. There is a final spatial signifier in 1 Kings 2:19 when Bathsheba, who is now queen mother, is seated at the right hand of her son, King Solomon. Placing Bathsheba at his side signifies honour and authority.[6] Bathsheba has transitioned from one who has been objectified to recognized royal status.

Characterization of Bathsheba also changes from 2 Samuel to 1 Kings. In 2 Samuel Bathsheba is introduced through her relations to men: she is the "daughter of Eliam," and the "wife of Uriah the Hittite" (2 Samuel 11:3). Even after her incorporation into David's household she is still referred to as "Uriah's wife" (2

[4] Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 186–229.

[5] David A. Bosworth, *The Story Within a Story in Biblical Narrative* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 1–6.

[6] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 114–16.

Samuel 11:26). This shows that Bathsheba is still struggling to be a subject in her own narrative. David, in 2 Samuel is characterized through action, speech, and later his penitence. It is only in 1 Kings that Bathsheba has voice. She becomes a political actor who speaks, reasons, and negotiates succession. Bathsheba, characterized as near-silent in 2 Samuel, is later characterized as strategically articulate in 1 Kings. This characterization shows how voice and agency are narrative effects rather than stable character traits. This narrative-critical base does not, by itself, determine whether the sexual encounter is labelled adultery or sexual violence. What it does is convey ways in which the text organizes attention. David's moral drama is foregrounded, Bathsheba's experience is backgrounded. It is this distribution that creates the divergence between hegemonic, feminist, and womanist interpretations. It is these different interpretative fields that decide how to fill in the gaps, thus, deciding whose reality counts as the story.

The Hegemonic Script: David's Repentance and Bathsheba's Silence

Hegemony is the process by which dominant assumptions become common sense. It operates not only through coercion, but through the normalization of a worldview.[7] In biblical interpretation, hegemonic readings often appear "traditional," yet they function by centring male authority and theological drama while marginalizing women's subjectivity. In the story of Bathsheba, this frequently takes the form of a David-centred moral arc. His sin is acknowledged, he repents, and it is the divine forgiveness that becomes the climax of interpretation. This centring of David comes at an ethical cost to Bathsheba as her experience is treated as secondary: she is either recognized as background to David's repentance, or as a moral problem in which she is imagined as complicit. Traditional or hegemonic readings often rely on a characterization of Bathsheba as an adulteress or seductress. It is worth noting that this interpretation is not explicit in the narrative, as the narrative does not provide an account of her desire, or her consent. Characterizing Bathsheba in this light stems from a desire to stabilize ambiguity. It is this desire that leads to appropriating blame. The result of this placing of blame transfers moral weight away from royal coercion and toward a familiar trope of female temptation. Thus, hegemonic interpretation can extend the text's silence into a further silencing by constructing Bathsheba as morally suspect.

Exum argues that the interpretive commentary has become complicit in the violence that it is interpreting. She calls this secondary interpretive harm "rape by the pen."[8] When the encounter between David and Bathsheba is framed as adultery, theological attention sways toward forgiveness instead of accountability. It is this interpretive pattern that echoes ecclesial strategies of concealment exposed in contemporary abuse crises. Institutions in crises have managed scandal through

[7] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 12–13.

[8] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 170–72.

silence, as well as cultivating narratives of repentance and restoration. These institutions then move on while survivors remain unnamed, unseen, and unheard. Hegemonic reading views Bathsheba's body as a narrative instrument. It is the site of David's sin and the vehicle through which dynastic continuity is secured. However, David's confession, judgement, and forgiveness, which is generally considered the theological closure of 2 Samuel, do not address Bathsheba's moral injury. It is this divide that creates a space for ethical rereading. An ethical examination of the text conveys how resolution depends on whose story is allowed to matter within the narrative.

Feminist Rereading: Naming Violence and Recovering Silence

Feminist hermeneutics confront the silences and power dynamics that hegemonic readings normalize. Rather than treating Bathsheba as complicit, feminist scholarship attends to royal power, and narrative verbs of control. David "sent" for Bathsheba, "took" her, and "lay with" her (2 Samuel 11:3–4). Exum believes that the use of these verbs indicates aggression rather than consent. She further claims that it is the narrative's refusal to narrate Bathsheba's perspective that is in itself a form of violence.[9] To reread Bathsheba's narrative through a feminist lens reframes her story as one of sexual violence enacted through royal privilege, rather than a story of adultery and repentance. Feminist readings analyze the ethical effects of textual omission. By compressing a violent sexual encounter into a small number of lines, the reader is trained to treat that experience as less significant than the male character's moral processing. Trible's work in *Texts of Terror* conveys how the silence that surrounds gendered violence can never be neutral. She believes it is a narrative strategy that can perpetuate harm by refusing recognition.[10] Her framework shows that the silence in Bathsheba's story enables later interpretive traditions to imagine consent, to distribute blame, or to focus exclusively on David's penitence.

Feminist rereading does much more than expose violence from within the narrative. Koenig's research emphasizes Bathsheba's survival, both within the world of the narrative and in interpretive history. She notes that Bathsheba does not disappear from the story after her suffering and trauma, but instead reappears in 1 Kings. Bathsheba, not only does she reappear, she also speaks and acts. Koenig highlights the subtle moments where Bathsheba's speech disrupts David's dominance and where her political action becomes decisive in the succession narrative.[11] Her interpretive framework is not denying the victimization that occurs, but instead refuses to let victimization become the final interpretive identity. Koenig believes that survival should be recognized as a theological lens that can

[9] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 73–75.
[10] Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 1–3.
[11] Koenig, *Bathsheba Survives,* 19–24.

coexist with naming harm. In a European ecclesial context, this feminist attention to naming violence and honouring survival resonates with the demands of survivor communities. Where institutions have historically preferred silence, feminist hermeneutics insists on speech, and where forgiveness has been centred without accountability, feminist reading insists on moral clarity regarding coercion and power. Bathsheba's survival, read alongside contemporary survivors, becomes a summons for the Church to prioritize listening and restorative ethics rather than reputational management.

Womanist Midrash: Reparative Imagination and the Restoration of Voice

Womanist hermeneutics moves beyond feminist critique by centring the experiences of black women and communities that are shaped by marginalization. Where it differs from feminist interpretation is that it resists the patriarchal assumptions embedded in both text and tradition and employs practices that restore dignity to those rendered voiceless. In *Womanist Midrash*, Gafney uses Midrashic hermeneutics to narrate the story not told by giving voice to women whose experiences the canonical text compresses or omits.[12] Gafney understands that Bathsheba is not sexually available to David; she notes that Bathsheba's naming formula, "daughter of Eliam, and wife of Uriah the Hittite" (2 Samuel 11:3) should have protected her from David's advances. Gafney treats David's gaze as transgression and insists that Bathsheba's dignity cannot be reduced to erotic spectacle. Her framework does not claim to recover historical speech; what it does do is perform ethical truth-telling that refuses to allow silences found in the text be interpreted as consent. It is this imaginative retelling of the story that confronts the violence that is embedded within the text. Gafney also considers that this imaginative rereading models how Scripture might be read as a resource for survival. Womanist midrash frames interpretation itself as a form of resistance. Where hegemonic traditions have used Scripture to normalize patriarchal authority, womanist hermeneutics reconfigures reading as a reparative act. Reading between the lines of the narrative allows the work of midrash to become a mode of ecclesial healing. It names harm, restores personhood, and imagines futures beyond victimization. In a Europe that is still struggling with gendered injustice and institutional betrayal, this reparative imagination offers a disciplined way of reading that honors silenced experience and cultivates ethical responsibility.

Reading Bathsheba in a European Key: Theology after Silence

To read Bathsheba through feminist and womanist lenses is to read Scripture alongside Europe's ecclesial wounds. Patterns visible in the narrative, such as silence around sexual violence, the protection of male authority, and the centring

[12] Gafney, *Womanist Midrash,* 3–6.

of perpetrators in the narrative, all echo the dynamics disclosed in abuse investigations and survivor testimony. These similarities require acknowledgement of how interpretive habits can shape communal ethics. When churches preach David's penitential trajectory while leaving Bathsheba unnamed, they are at risk of reinforcing a theological culture that prioritizes forgiveness for perpetrators over justice for victims. Schüssler Fiorenza argues that feminist biblical interpretation must move from mere reflection to resistance, and challenge oppressive strategies found within the text, and how they are received.[13] She argues that this resistance is not a rejection of Scripture but a commitment to reading responsibly in view of real-world consequences. Reading through this framework allows Bathsheba's narrative to become a lens for ecclesial self-examination. This lens raises a series of questions: What do our readings train us to notice? Whose pain is narratively and theologically acknowledged? Where do we rush to closure, and who is left without justice? Koenig believes that negative characterizations of Bathsheba within Christian tradition have formed a trajectory of blame that survives in preaching and popular reception. Feminist and womanist rereading interrupts this trajectory by refusing misogynistic inference and by foregrounding coercive power. Thus, rereading becomes a form of ethical repair. It is this repair that names the church's complicity in harmful interpretive patterns and offers alternative modes of theological imagination that are rooted in accountability.

Generational Hermeneutics: Being Young, Catholic, and European

For young European theologians and Church members, the Bathsheba narrative can function as a case study in what it means to inherit a wounded ecclesial body and yet still pursue renewal. Feminist and womanist readings demonstrate that Scripture can be engaged through critical love. It can be engaged in a disciplined willingness to confront patriarchal residues in both text and church. Gafney describes these approaches as resources that delve deeply into the canon and draw on marginalized women as scriptural exemplars.[14] It is in this light that Bathsheba moves from a symbol of one who is objectified in 2 Samuel to an authoritative political figure in 1 Kings. Her reappearance, speech, and strategic action are testimony that silencing is not the end of her story. Survival can become resistance, and re-emergence can become agency. This interpretive pattern offers a theological grammar for refusing silence and for rebuilding ecclesial identity around listening, accountability, and justice.

[13] Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 14–18.
[14] Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 21–27.

Conclusion: Toward a Church that Listens

Rereading Bathsheba through feminist and womanist hermeneutics does more than revise an ancient narrative. It raises the ethical bar for interpretation within European Christianity. Bathsheba's story shows how narrative gaps and silences can be filled in ways that either perpetuate patriarchal assumptions or expose them. Hegemonic readings have frequently centred David's repentance and divine forgiveness while leaving Bathsheba's experience unacknowledged. Feminist and womanist approaches disrupt this reading by naming the violence, recovering survival, and restoring voice. A church that reads Bathsheba responsibly is a community that learns to listen, to what is said, to what is not said, and to those whose experiences have been minimized by tradition. This listening is not passive; instead it can be considered an act of ethical interpretation. By attending to Bathsheba's silencing and later her authority, European churches are confronted with how their reading practices shape their moral life: how forgiveness is framed, how accountability is pursued, and how survivors are heard. Bathsheba's story, retold through feminist and womanist lenses, thus illuminates a path toward ecclesial repair in which interpretation becomes not an instrument of control but a practice of justice-oriented transformation.

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RAHNER AND J. L. AUSTIN:

HOW THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE DOES THINGS WITH WORDS

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Abstract

In Pope Francis's apostolic letter *Ad theologiam promovendam*, theologians are called in and through their linguistic reflections, to "pour oil and wine on the wounds of humanity." The milieu for these linguistic reflections is found in "dialogue and encounter," "the need for" which, Pope Francis continued, "is, in fact, intrinsic to the human being and to the entire creation." This chapter will ask how the words of the theologian can be thought of as active in healing wounds, or themselves constituting the pouring of oil and wine. Rahner's "efficacious word" and J. L. Austin's "performative utterance" will be brought into dialogue to answer this evocative entreaty. Both are forged by an adversarial position taken against logical positivism. Both contemplate how sacramental language does things with words (obviously with Rahner, generally overlooked in the case of Austin), and both refer in passing to the role and status of the human in such utterances. The discussion will have two novel outworkings in the context of the question of theology in Europe today. First, speech acts will be applied constructively to the role of the priest in the formation of the People of God in the Eucharist. The application implies less of an instrumentality than a "self-realisation" (Rahner's term). Secondly, speech acts will be used to define the human in distinction to generative artificial intelligence.

Keywords: Karl Rahner; J. L. Austin; performative language; sacramental theology; theological language; artificial intelligence.

Pope Francis's *Ad theologiam promovendam* calls upon theologians in their linguistic reflections, to "pour oil and wine on the wounds of humanity."[1] These linguistic reflections are not to be found in systematic treatises or diverting journal articles, but in "dialogue and encounter," "the need for" which, Pope Francis continues, "is, in fact, intrinsic to the human being and to the entire creation."[2]

This chapter asks how the words of the theologian can be thought of as active in healing wounds, or themselves constituting the pouring of oil and wine. Rahner's "efficacious word" and J. L. Austin's "performative utterance" will be brought into dialogue to answer this evocative entreaty. Both are forged by an adversarial position taken against logical positivism. Both contemplate how sacramental language does things with words. And both refer in passing to the role and status of the human in such utterances, and in particular humanity's ontology of dialogue and encounter.

The contribution I seek to make, and for which this chapter is a precursor, is on two sides. Firstly, to address Austin. Austin's reputation in linguistic philosophy is secure, even more so now by the recent publication of his first biography, the excellent work of Mark Rowe.[3] But there is a strange paradox when it comes to Austin. In Rowe's account, Austin's faith is agnostic at best. Nothing more than a notional Anglican. Yet that hasn't stopped theologians greedily adopting his work, or, that is, greedily adopting his work as adapted subsequently by John Searle and Paul Grice.[4] It is quite surprising that philosophical theology, in its subsequent drawing on Austin, has not successfully paid attention to the importance of religious language within Austin's most famous lectures *How to Do Things with Words*.[5] True, Austin doesn't himself comment on the significance of several of his main linguistic examples being religious, merely observing their effectiveness. But the invitation is there, including one notable moment generally overlooked, when Austin tumbles indirectly into the question of sacramental language, to which I will turn shortly. So, I argue that the opportunity to compare Austin's performative utterances with Rahner's efficacious word represents a much sounder footing upon which philosophical theology can take Austinian steps.

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[1] Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html.

[2] Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam*, no. 3.

[3] M. W. Rowe, *J. L. Austin: Philosopher and D-Day Intelligence Officer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

[4] For instance, John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); H. Paul Grice, "Utterer's Meaning and Intention," *The Philosophical Review* 78, no. 2 (1969): 147–77, https://doi.org/10.2307/2184179.

[5] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, ed. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

The second side of my contribution is to consider Rahner's efficacious word in the light of Austin. Rahner's theology of the word, occasionally expressed, is not as prominent these days as the more systematic Barthian and post-Barthian strands. But I think they still strike, not least following his laments in the evocative essay "Priest and Poet": "Alas that there should still be no theology of the Word!"; and, similarly, in the opening of the essay to which I will restrict myself in this chapter, "The Word and the Eucharist": "it is really astonishing that we Catholics provide no space, no systematic place for a theology of the word in the average theology of our schools, in the Latin manuals etc… the word of God is discussed only *in obliquo*."[6]

But underlying my attention to Rahner's efficacious word is a more subliminal purpose, one on which I have only scratched the surface here. That is the possibility of Rahner having in mind for his theology of the word an opponent in logical positivism. If that can be shown, then part of my contribution will be to demonstrate a common link, currently missing, in Rahner's linguistic philosophical position, to that which one can find in Barth and in Austin. True, as far as I can so far tell, the logical positivists are only obliquely present in Rahner, very different to Austin who wears his anti-positivist credentials on his sleeve. But in the work to understand the philosophical roots of Rahner's fundamental theology, for which notable recent strides have been made with Heidegger and Erich Przywara, this could be an intriguing new strand for further research.[7]

The prevalence of religious language in Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* is an under-appreciated aspect of that intriguing work. His lectures initially proceed by proposing a distinction between performative and constative words, that is that some language performs, performative utterances, and some language indicates or depicts, constative utterances. His aim, as he says in the very opening page, is to rebut the logical positivists, or as he more pejoratively describes the position, the Descriptive Fallacy. For the positivists—and here Austin has his nemesis A. J. Ayer in mind—language only has value insofar as it includes empirically verifiable statements, statements about something. Austin's aim is to rebut the positivists. The performative utterance, not necessarily about anything at all but doing something, like a bet, is his instrument.

Then, after problematising the performative/constative distinction in multiple ways, he famously restarts the approach and begins a fresh attack on positivism by proposing instead that all language performs. Hence, we have the question of

[6] Karl Rahner, "Priest and Poet," in *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, trans. Karl-H. Kruger and Boniface Kruger, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), 294–317; Karl Rahner, "The Word and the Eucharist," in *More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1987), 253–86.

[7] See for instance Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004), and the forthcoming work of my colleague and friend, Dr Carl Scerri.

the varying degrees of illocutionary force—some language is more performatively forceful than others.

Now it is often noticed, although not considered further, that one of Austin's initial examples of a pure performative is the priest's declaration of a marriage.[8] In his subsequent discussion, Austin hints too at another performative utterance, namely the naming of a child in a baptism. Significant enough you would think for an agnostic, but of course he doesn't give any consideration to how these sacramental uses of language actually perform.

But as if uncomfortable at the apparent ease in moving between secular performatives like a bet and religious performatives like a marriage, Austin then appears to disparage sacramental theology, opposing it to his emerging view about performatives.[9] Now what is interesting in the passage I will describe shortly is firstly that in his disparagement of an Augustinian/Anglican sacramental theology he inadvertently moves closer to the Catholic *ex opere operato*. And secondly, what we find in this apparently throw-away passage is evidence of the same proximity between the word and the sacrament which I will show Rahner finds.

Austin writes that "we are" prone to "feeling that the effectiveness of the most consequential performative utterances, such as a promise, consists in their being uttered as (merely) the outward and visible sign, for convenience or other record or for information, of an inward and spiritual act."[10] Note the appropriation of the formula from the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, itself borrowing from Augustine—an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual act or grace. If, Austin continues, an utterance such as a promise is only an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual act, then "it is but a short step to go on to believe or to assume without realizing that for many purposes the outward utterance is a description, *true or false*, of the occurrence of the inward performance."[11] In turn, then, this superficially appears like solid moralism. Austin writes: "One who says 'promising is not merely a matter of uttering words! It is an inward and spiritual act!' is apt to appear as a solid moralist."[12]

But Austin is being ironic, and possibly intends a certain snarkiness to theological language. His performative utterance, he says, disproves this approach which leans towards a certain positivism of its own. Moreover, the ethical implications are that the outward sign of an inward act involves metaphysical speculation about intentions. What had appeared as solid moralism evaporates into thin air, or as he calls it, the "invisible depths of ethical space." Rather, as Austin says, the performative utterance stands on its own two feet. Intentions are not relevant to the efficaciousness of the performative word. "Accuracy and morality alike are

[8] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 5.
[9] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 9–10.
[10] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 9.
[11] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 9.
[12] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 10.

on the side of the plain saying that *our word is our bond*," he writes.[13] A promise is a promise regardless of any inward or spiritual act associated with it.

Now the interesting thing emerging is how Austin's linguistic philosophy has enabled him to see the pitfalls in one branch of sacramental theology whilst unconsciously working to affirm another. *Ex opere operato*, as we know, is the ancient doctrine which I have elsewhere traced back beyond the 13th century to Augustine and even to St Paul, that precisely accepts that the inward intentions of a priest in administering, and less clearly the intentions of the recipient, are not material to the efficacy of the sacrament in question.[14] Baptism is baptism even if the baptiser and the baptised are children on the beach, so long as the invocation involves the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In Austin's linguistic philosophy, the Augustine of the Donatist controversy defeats the Augustine as adopted by Luther and then Cranmer.

The way is now clear to consider Rahner's essay "The Word and the Eucharist," written just a few years after Austin's lectures were first delivered at the University of Oxford. Really, it represents the beginning of an unfinished theology of the word. And there are notable features which Rahner shares with Austin: an unspecified but clear attack on positivism, and an interest in how language performs in sacramental settings.

Firstly, Rahner follows Austin in taking as his opponent a form of linguistic philosophy which champions the statement—positivism, although Rahner doesn't name it as such. The "Word of God," he writes, is "not to be taken as a set of doctrinal propositions 'about something': nor just intellectual description..."; it is not only something which "teaches something, the true and binding word 'about' something, the word which makes a statement about something." No, "it is to be treated as the word in which the reality itself draws nigh and announces itself and constitutes itself present."[15] "It is a revelatory, actualising word, in which and under which alone the thing designated is present."[16] Hearing in faith, with Rahner's work on *Hearers of the Word* some twenty years in the past, is not just "about something, but the reception of the reality itself about which the audible statement is made."[17] Ecclesial speech is entirely performative: "to speak prophetically, to teach, to exhort, to instruct, to edify, to console, to persuade, to announce, to transmit, to recall, to utter the (sacramental) word of life, to judge, to give testimony."[18]

Now Rahner's aim is to secure a theology of the word which is conducive to a theology of the sacraments. That the two are so amenable to being aligned should

[13] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 10.
[14] Oliver Wright, "The Performativity of Christian Discourse: A Theological Theory of Language as Act" (DPhil diss., University of Oxford, 2025), Chapter 6.
[15] Rahner, "Word and Eucharist," 255.
[16] Rahner, "Word and Eucharist," 261.
[17] Rahner, "Word and Eucharist," 262.
[18] Rahner, "Word and Eucharist," 265.

not be a surprise given the acknowledged similarity of the question of the sign as it appears in linguistics and sacramental ontology.[19] Rahner presents his findings in two sections: first with the general purpose of securing a theology of the word alongside the sacraments, for which he presents six theses. Second, and much more succinctly, a theology of the word in its supreme manifestation, the Eucharist.

In part one, Rahner's six theses demonstrate how the theology of the Word of God coexists with that of the sacrament, alongside Rahner's characteristic interest in the reception of the Word as much as its proclamatory force. (1) The word of God uttered by the Church has the character of *God's* word. (2) The word of God represents an inner moment of God's salvific activity for humankind, albeit in conjunction with human activity as part of the body. (3) The word of God represents the coming together of an inner moment of grace with the external historical word. (4) The Word of God is salutary in that it brings with it what it affirms. This is the principal performative thesis, for which Rahner offers two brief proofs, "first and [decisively] from Scripture," and second in dogma. (5) There are varying degrees of grace manifest in the performativity of this word. There is a dialectic presented here, from on the one hand the word which manifests a full and radical realisation of its essence, and on the other hand a provisional, secondary, subsidiary and deficient guise. And finally (6) the supreme realisation of the performativity of the Word of God is and only is in the sacrament, the coming of the salvific action of God in the radical commitment of the Church in the situation decisive for the individual's salvation. For this to be the case, and here Rahner makes a formal assessment of language very similar to Austin's approach, the word which brings about a new reality is dependent on its being couched in the form ordained by the ultimate author of its efficacious character.

With that said, Rahner is able then to move to an intriguing exposition of *ex opere operato*, acknowledging as he does the availability of grace beyond the sacraments, and finding ultimately that this performativity of the word of God in the Church represents the supreme self-realisation of the Church as Church. Indeed, self-realisation is a phrase he repeats six times in the essay. There is no scholastic instrumentality here for the priest or for the Church. Rahner says carefully and perhaps deliberately obliquely, "the *opus operatum*... as the act of [the Church's] self-*realisation* [*Selbstverwirklichung*] [is] much more proper to its nature as a society than if the *opus operatum* was something static or substance-like."[20] *Opus operatum*, then, is "the eschatologically efficacious word of God,

[19] An idea mined with fascinating (and in some quarters controversial) consequences in Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995).

[20] Rahner, "Word and Eucharist," 274.

as the absolute self-realisation of the Church, according to its essence as the primary sacrament."[21]

So, as per Austin's performative utterances let alone Rahner's, sacramental language is an exemplar of performative language, bringing about what it declares, as opposed merely to being about something. Such clear performativity, for both Austin and Rahner, depends for Rahner on the word's being constituted by their positive institution by one with authority to do so. Austin uses the example of the commander in chief being the only one capable of declaring war. Rahner would refer, although he doesn't here, to Christ's words of institution.

This chapter began with Pope Francis's summons (a performative utterance!) to theologians to heal using their linguistic reflections. This summons obviously goes wider than administration of the sacraments. But, in Rahner, we find the means to recognise the efficacy of grace even beyond the sacramental word. To those of us interested in or involved with pastoral ministry, we know the power of that grace alive in language, whether brought within a sacramental liturgy or not. As Rahner says elsewhere, in the performativity of utterances, the utterer in his or her humanity somehow becomes the force of that utterance in their entire existence.

And this then gives pause in our contemporary society where non-human utterances are becoming more and more prevalent. What are the acts which we can attribute to a chatbot's linguistic utterances? How can we measure the "healing" or "grace," even, which such a robot is able to convey? With Rahner and Austin, we may find a means to parse how AI's speech acts fall flat. That is, the utterer in question cannot "become" the utterance. The connectivity is lost, the connectivity that is, between testimony and testifier, promise and the promisor, or indeed the sacrament and the priest.

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[21] Rahner, "Word and Eucharist," 274–75.

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FIDES QUAERENS DIALOGUS:

FAITH SEEKING DIALOGUE

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Abstract

A decline in once-traditional Catholicism in Ireland, together with increased diversity in society, has meant that the context of education has changed. As Dublin is the capital and largest urban centre, diversity and decline in religious practice are primarily evident there; consequently, the delivery of Catholic primary education within a Catholic school ethos faces a changing future. This chapter tackles the concept of dialogue, indicating where its failure compounds the problems of divestment. Using Catholic education in Belgium as an example, this chapter seeks to place the Belgian dialogue schools in dialogue with the present situation in the Archdiocese of Dublin. The argument put forward is that the Belgian dialogue model of primary Catholic education is more likely to succeed in the Archdiocese of Dublin, as both societies are primarily urban and increasingly representative of life in the Western world. The dialogue school is not a neutral entity. Instead, it is rich in Christian understanding and, through Christ and the joy of the gospel, offers the school community real engagement in and through the Christian faith, and prepares it for a future Ireland. In sum, this chapter affirms dialogue as the key to success in Catholic primary religious education in the Archdiocese of Dublin. It argues that serious consideration is needed to optimise the delivery of the Catholic faith to children attending Catholic primary schools. The Belgian dialogue schools provide another perspective that could be transformative and self-reflective, benefiting the entire school community in the continuing Catholic primary schools following divestment in the Archdiocese of Dublin.

Keywords: Catholic education; Catholic dialogue school; religious education; Catholic identity; dialogue; pluralism; school divestment.

Catholic Education in Ireland

The Irish Episcopal Conference describes the vision of Catholic education as rooted in Christ. Catholic education represents the Catholic faith as a body of truth handed on through religious education and catechesis. However, the bishops also maintain that this education is foundational and needs a community response. Their approach follows directly from the teachings on religious education and freedom in Vatican II and developed in the magisterium of Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. The Catholic community is responsible for fulfilling this mission. In their local community and parish, the child realises that they are part of a larger faith community.[1] The Conference describes how the curriculum aims to help "children mature about their spiritual, moral, and religious lives through their encounter with, [and] exploration, and celebration of the Catholic faith."[2] This is usually lived out through the school ethos, with the support of the teaching staff and the management board.

The Context of Catholic Primary Education

The majority of Irish primary schools are Catholic in origin. In the late 20th century, over 90% of the population were Catholic; however, by the 2022 census, this had declined to 69%. As Dublin is the capital and largest urban centre, diversity and decline in religious practice are most evident here; consequently, for the Archdiocese of Dublin, the delivery of Catholic education within a Catholic school ethos faces a changed future.

Response to the Changed Context: Divestment

The Church's leadership has addressed the changed circumstances of modern Ireland. It cooperates with the government's plan to establish four hundred non/multi-denominational primary schools by 2030. Many of these schools will not be newly constructed schools but will be repurposed schools through divestment.[3] Some parents are slow to agree. A recent survey from the Catholic Church in Ireland indicates that most parents consider the school's academic reputation, location and code of discipline ahead of its religious persuasion.

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[1] Irish Episcopal Conference, *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* (Dublin: Veritas, 2015), 12.

[2] Irish Episcopal Conference, *Catholic Preschool*, 31.

[3] In October 2024, the then minister for education, Norma Foley, reported that of 52 new primary schools, 51 were multidenominational, but only 20 schools have changed from religious ethos to multidenominational in a 10-year period. Diarmuid Pepper, "Scheme to divest Catholic schools has 'yielded very small results,' minister admits," *The Journal*, October 2024, https://www.thejournal.ie/school-divestment-schemes-yielded-small-results-new-survey-planned-6509719-Oct2024/.

My Investigation

I investigate the "Catholic Dialogue School," which was developed in Belgium, and assess the value of applying this model of primary education to an increasingly pluralist and multicultural society. Modern urban society is becoming increasingly complex, and religious education must address and appropriately respond to this new situation. At the heart of Catholic education, in Belgium's latest model and Ireland's possibility, is dialogue.

While asserting the importance of an open and welcoming dialogue vis-à-vis those of other faiths and/or ideologies and Catholic primary education, it is essential to recognise that this new project for Belgian education was not without its problems, not least among other churches, faiths and social and educational bodies in the country. This applies to Ireland too. The complicating factor in the Dublin Archdiocese is divestment. Some parents will want a non-denominational school. Others will want a different denominational education. Some will wish for a distinct religious patronage, while others still want secular patronage. Difficulties have arisen where the Church has agreed to divest its patronage from specific schools, only to be greeted with parental opposition, where a sizable number want the traditional patronage. Finding solutions to practical problems like this requires an openness to different conceptual systems, personal commitments and deeply rooted values. In short, there is an essential need for effective dialogue. It is not argued that there is no dialogue already, but our dialogue system needs to be better in the fraught environment of patronage.

Tension and Value in Dialogic Education

One of the tensions within a dialogic education is that it is not genuinely flexible in Catholic primary schooling. In Catholic dialogue schools, the curriculum is firmly set in favour of a Catholic primary education while in dialogue with children from other faith backgrounds. Even while two school members are in dialogue, be they students and/or teachers, there is also the context of the dialogue to consider. This can have a positive aspect, as a learning dialogue of difference can transfer from the classroom to society, a key element of dialogical education. However, equally, the social norms (in this case, Catholic) of the school can sometimes fail adequately to recognise the background and dynamic identity and culture of the students who are not part of the Catholic tradition and the ground rules in the dialogue schools would need to be re-examined regularly to ensure it is a place of belonging for all students, staff and members of the school community.[4]

[4] R. Wegerif, S. Shi, A. Rubio-Jimenez, Y. Long, Q. Liu, and C. C. Chang, "Dialogic Education: Tensions and Dilemmas," in *International Encyclopedia of Education*, 4th ed., ed.

Vatican II reminds us that "evangelisation is therefore the mission of the Church to proclaim, baptise and train the baptised [and] the Church upholds the principle of plurality of school systems to safeguard her objectives in the face of cultural pluralism."[5] The value of dialogical education lies in opening up dialogue from different standpoints that expand and develop the understanding of the students, staff, and, from that, the wider community. The students can deepen and further awaken their identity while learning communication skills and gaining knowledge from and with people with shared or different perspectives. Education through and for dialogue could thus be a real possibility for the Dublin Archdiocese's schools following divestment.

New Patronage

The successful transition to new patronage is not just a political and educational issue—it also necessarily involves good communication, understanding, patience, and a clear sense of purpose.[6] In addition to this necessary change to better reflect the needs of Irish citizens, there must be comprehensive and concrete planning for the composition of the Catholic schools, which will continue as such post-divestment. The question of how these schools will integrate into society as they engage in continuous change will, as for all schools, be an ever-present challenge. After divestment, those schools that remain Catholic will not be isolated entities. They will be primary schools in communities in and around people of diverse beliefs and lifestyles. For the Catholic schools to fulfil their Christian vision, mission, and witness to promote the Kingdom of God and contribute to the flourishing of a just and peaceful society, they must be open, fair and welcoming places of learning. This emphasis on openness and inclusivity is key to the proposed solutions for the continuing Catholic schools. While trust and confidence are essential in making change happen, for Catholics, the life of Christ needs to remain central in the Catholic school.

Didier Pollefeyt and Michael Richards describe four types of schools to identify how various cultures and religious identities interact in educational programmes. "The dialogue school," "the monologue school," "the multilogue (colourful) school," and "the neutral (colourless) school."[7]

Rob Tierney, Fazal Rizvi and Kadriye Ercikan (Cambridge: Elsevier, 2023), 604, https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-818630-5.14071-0.

[5] A. J. Coolahan, C. Hussey and F. Kilfeather, *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector: Report of the Forum's Advisory Group* (Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, 2012), 7–8; 12.

[6] Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather, *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism*, 70.

[7] Brisbane Catholic Education, "Victoria Scale Handout," 2022, *Catholic Identity*, accessed August 6, 2024, https://www.catholicidentity.bne.catholic.edu.au/.

Our focus is on "the dialogue school," where each student's identity is accepted in dialogue with the Catholic tradition.[8] It is committed to diversity and hospitality in religious beliefs for everyone studying or working there, while actively seeking to promote Catholic identity.[9] The Christian message sets the tone for this dialogue, where the students are all encouraged to act in solidarity.[10]

For "the monologue school," Catholic faith formation is the main objective. The students follow the same programme and participate in religious services to achieve this Catholic identity.[11] Next, the "multilogue (colourful) school" which does not provide a religious identity but strives to develop equality, solidarity, and care amongst everyone, paying attention to each person's unique nature.[12]

The final school example in the scale is "the neutral school." This school differs from the first two schools because it does not consider religious identity or cultural expression. While "the monologue school" celebrates difference, any expression of faith is greatly discouraged lest it inhibit the school's secular aims.[13]

I have found that "the dialogue school" is the most persuasive, apt and contextually open option for a school. It is a place where developing a religious identity is founded on the Catholic faith. There is potential fruitfulness in dialogue, especially in a dialogue that is in the critical correlation with modernity's challenges.

In Catholic dialogue schools, due to the diversity of opinions, students are called to examine their beliefs. In this way, they begin to work towards a more mature faith, where they become aware of their choices and can deepen their Catholic identity.[14] While the Catholic tradition remains a central theme of the Catholic dialogue schools, the Catholic message "sets the tone for this dialogue ... amid plurality, ... from being a Catholic, one lives in plurality."[15] Listening without attempting to change the other's opinion does justice to the different opinions in mutual respect. This ethical attitude aids the receiver in their personal growth and development, where they understand that their identity is also other to the receiver.[16] The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education reminds us that "a school must help ... [the student] spell out the meaning of his experiences and

[8] Katholiek Onderwijs Vlaanderen, "Mission Statement: Catholic Dialogue School" (September 11, 2018), https://theo.kuleuven.be/apps/press/ecsi/files/2023/05/Catholic-Education-Flanders-Mission-Statement-on-the-Catholic-Dialogue-School.pdf.

[9] Brisbane Catholic Education, "Victoria Scale Handout," 2022.

[10] Brisbane Catholic Education, "Victoria Scale Handout," 2022.

[11] Didier Pollefeyt and Michael Richards, "Catholic Dialogue Schools, Enhancing Catholic School Identity in Contemporary Contexts of Religious Pluralisation and Social and Individual Secularisation," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 96, no. 1 (2020): 103, https://doi.org/10.2143/ETL.96.1.3287376.

[12] Pollefeyt and Richards, "Catholic Dialogue Schools," 105.

[13] Pollefeyt and Richards, "Catholic Dialogue Schools," 106.

[14] Pollefeyt and Richards, "Catholic Dialogue Schools," 107.

[15] Pollefeyt and Richards, "Catholic Dialogue Schools," 107.

[16] Pollefeyt and Richards, "Catholic Dialogue Schools," 108.

their truths" on their journey "towards becoming a fully-integrated human being."[17] In addition, there are many variations within a religious tradition, and this may also provide the more significant challenge of learning to accept the plurality within one's religious tradition, for which the dialogue school is beneficial.[18]

Because of their diversity, Catholic dialogue schools argue they are well-positioned to grow their Catholic identity through interreligious dialogue aimed at mutual growth and hospitality. However, this new school concept is criticised from the right-wing point of view due to its openness and apparent loss of Catholic tradition, and also on the left, as it is viewed as a strategy to attract students of other religions, in particular, Muslim students, while maintaining the Catholic school monopoly in Belgium.[19]

Faith in Catholic Dialogue Schools

The Belgian dialogue school's mission statement opens with an introduction that welcomes the students, parents, and school staff.[20] Once they are content to operate within the Catholic dialogue school ethos, this welcome occurs irrespective of their religious or philosophical background.[21] Firstly, the Catholic dialogue school provides quality education that develops the student's whole personality. The foundation of this education is rooted in the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. Then, the final outlook of the school contributes to the shaping of each child's personality "in a context of plurality and difference."[22] In its first element, as part of its education, the Catholic dialogue school seeks to form people who are willing to live together harmoniously amid diversity. Its second element argues that the world and its inhabitants are a gift, and we experience a real responsibility through our human freedom. Using the life of Jesus and the Bible as its backdrop, this element places love and a belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the centre of its message for the life of those in the school and for the school itself.[23] In its final element, the dialogue school mission statement maintains that it brings together "Muslims, Jews,... believers and non-believers ... who

[17] Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1977), nos. 27, 29, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19770319_catholic-school_en.html.

[18] Pollefeyt and Richards, "Catholic Dialogue Schools," 109.

[19] Leni Franken, "Country Report: Belgium–Flemish Community," *British Journal of Religious Education* 39, no. 3 (2017): 237, https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2017.1345515.

[20] Katholiek Onderwijs Vlaanderen, "Mission Statement."

[21] Lieven Boeve, "Faith in Dialogue: The Christian Voice in the Catholic Dialogue School," *International Studies in Catholic Education* 11, no. 1 (2019): 38, https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2018.1561132.

[22] Boeve, "Faith in Dialogue," 38.

[23] Boeve, "Faith in Dialogue," 38.

want to find significance in living and living together."[24] Through this dialogue, the statement determines that people will learn from each other and deepen their identity.[25]

Identity is developed through dialogue and is not established in advance. The Bible serves as a source of this content, providing insight into God through its holy passages and their interpretation, as well as through the early Church and the life of Jesus. In this way, they provide meaning and significance to life and offer perspectives where compassion, justice and love are understood.[26] Each Catholic dialogue school is motivated through this Christian voice in its operation, and not only through religious education classes. This allows faith in attitude and content to be discussed and experienced by everyone, irrespective of their religious background.[27]

The Value or Otherwise of Dialogue Schools in Ireland

In his investigations, Leni Franken turns to Ireland and reports that, in 2008, the Human Rights Committee criticised the state for the lack of secular schools, as Catholic schools remain dominant in Irish society. He also argues that though Catholic dialogue schools in Belgium have an open policy, their compulsory Catholic input is offensive to some and undermines educational freedom.[28] Yet I argue that he fails to recognise their unique value and possibilities for a fresh approach, which may be pertinent in Ireland, where society is changing rapidly along with its educational needs and Catholic divestment from primary education is an ongoing development.

Irish Learning from Belgian Dialogue

Belgium, similar to Ireland, is a country where the Catholic Church dominated society for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Again, like Ireland, the Belgian Catholic Church is now declining in size and moving from the centre towards the margins of society. In parishes in both Dublin and Belgium, there is a reduction in those receiving sacraments. In some cases, ceremonies have become family celebrations where the focus is no longer on God but on the party

[24] Boeve, "Faith in Dialogue," 38.

[25] Boeve, "Faith in Dialogue," 39.

[26] Boeve, "Faith in Dialogue," 45.

[27] Boeve, "Faith in Dialogue," 46.

[28] Leni Franken, "The Freedom of Religion and the Freedom of Education in Twenty-First Century Belgium: A Critical Approach," *British Journal of Religious Education* 38, no. 3 (2016): 319, https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2015.1113934.

afterwards.[29] Meanwhile, a majority of primary schools in the Archdiocese are still Catholic, even though the Archdiocese supports a pathway to divest some of these schools. In Belgium, the concept of Catholic dialogue schools has proven successful in navigating this shift from a dominant Catholic population to a more pluralist one.

Instead of focusing on the reduction in the number of Catholic schools, I urge the stakeholders to look to the more profound questions of how they can support a dialogue that includes the richness and joy of the gospel with a broader community in our growing pluralist society, inviting everyone to be part of the solution.

In July 2022, Pope Francis argued that we must examine new ways to think about how we express our faith. He argued that secularisation demands that everyone reflect on societal changes and how people manage their lives. Through this, he argued that there will be an understanding that it is not a crisis of faith but one of how it is imagined. He determined that we must challenge ourselves to witness and reimagine our faith through discernment and joy while making Jesus known.[30] Keeping Pope Francis's words in mind, we turn now to *Share the Good News: National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland*, which is the foundation for the primary school curriculum.[31]

Curriculum and Dialogue

The National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland builds upon the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Catechesis is expected to have an ecumenical dimension at all times, so it suggests methods for making the treasure of the Catholic faith available to the Irish people.[32] It recognises diversity in Irish society and identifies an increase in the migrant population. The directory describes the newcomers as a gift and a challenge. It suggests that well-designed welcomes are essential to enhance the Church and offer more than material riches to the people. The document argues that secularisation, as an attempt to exclude God and religion from culture and public life, is on the increase and represents a break with Christianity

[29] Jos Moons and Jens Van Rompaey, "A Good Beginning Is Half the Task? The Synodal Process in Belgium," in *Synodality and the Recovery of Vatican II: A New Way for Catholics*, ed. Stephen J. McKinney, Thomas O'Loughlin, and Beata Toth (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2024), 110.

[30] Francis, "Homily at Vespers with Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Consecrated Persons, Seminarians and Pastoral Workers," Basilica of Notre-Dame de Québec, July 28, 2022 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2022/documents/20220728-omelia-vespri-quebec.html.

[31] Irish Episcopal Conference, *Share the Good News: National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2010).

[32] Irish Episcopal Conference, *Share the Good News*, 90.

and the religious and moral traditions of humanity.[33] The document maintains that pluralism allows positive respect for difference in the quest for truth through individuals and faith communities in society.

However, it is essential to note that in the curriculum, it is not until the children are eleven and twelve that interfaith dialogue is studied. At this point, the children are encouraged to participate in ecumenical and interfaith activities and are presented with the vocabulary for the beliefs of other Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities.[34] The reality in Irish primary schools today is that the classroom already contains a variety of faith backgrounds. While this dialogue with other faiths is valuable, it could benefit from inclusion earlier in their education as an ongoing dialogue to help create a more inclusive curriculum. In this way, the children would learn to stand together in solidarity early on and be more confident in appreciating and understanding other faith positions.

By accepting the need to address diversity in the classroom from the start, the Archdiocese could plan towards a curriculum that would still respect the Catholic tradition but also introduce the Christian faith through dialogue in the everyday life of the schoolchild. Lieven Boeve explains how the Belgian dialogue schools have achieved this through their new curriculum based on the pedagogical project of the Catholic dialogue school, which is expressed in seven structural signposts.[35]

New Structural Signposts

The seven signposts listed are based on biblical insights.[36] Each school chooses one of these as its primary focus and can choose another to concentrate on from its pedagogical tradition. The form of education drawn from these signposts is then directed by the staff through projects and initiatives while also following all standard school regulations and policies.[37] The ethos of the Belgian Catholic schools is evident throughout the school's running in its rules, policies and leadership, with conflict mediation as a core element.[38] This ethos fosters an environment where staff and students demonstrate kindness and respect, embracing their differences. This development of identity construction in dialogue with others offers a pedagogical opportunity that encourages everyone to be more reflective

[33] Irish Episcopal Conference, *Share the Good News*, 26.

[34] Irish Episcopal Conference, *Catholic Preschool*, 84, 106.

[35] Lieven Boeve, "Catholic Dialogue Schools under Construction: From Theory to Practice," in *The Catholic School and the Intercultural and Interreligious Challenges: CEEC Acts of the International Symposium* (Brussels, 2019), 12.

[36] Boeve, "Catholic Dialogue Schools," 12.

[37] Boeve, "Catholic Dialogue Schools," 13.

[38] Boeve, "Catholic Dialogue Schools," 13.

and to be able to relate to others.[39] The transformation provided by the school community allows for a flourishing society to develop outside, where those of varying faiths can comfortably mingle in acceptance of difference. Equally, within the school day, Lieven Boeve argues for a Catholic dialogue school that is visible at all celebrations, both Catholic and not, and one that consistently provides space and time for encounters with the children.[40]

Limitations, Prospects and Future Research

In conclusion, from examining primary religious education in the Archdiocese of Dublin in light of the dialogue schools in Belgium, I argue that the key to the future lies in dialogue. To achieve this, differences discussed in dialogue develop children's Christian identity within a plural society.

Keeping the words of Pope Francis in mind in the Archdiocese, serious consideration needs to be given to optimising the delivery of the Catholic faith for children attending Catholic primary schools. The Belgian dialogue model of primary Catholic education is more likely to succeed in the Archdiocese of Dublin, as both societies are predominantly urban and increasingly representative of life in the Western world. The dialogue school model is rich in Christian understanding through Christ and the joy of the gospel, offering the school community genuine engagement in and through the Catholic faith.

Also, further research would be valuable that draws comparisons between the project of the GRACE report, based at the University of Limerick, but beyond the scope of my research, and the Belgian dialogue schools. In addition, distinct issues, such as the faith-commitment and engagement of the teaching staff of primary schools, the composition of Boards of Management, pressures on parish life and structures, etc., also require further inquiry.

Catholic religious education is a rich source of faith formation for Irish primary school children; however, the Belgian dialogue schools provide another perspective, which could be transformative and self-reflective for the primary education of the children and benefit the entire school community in the continuing Catholic schools following divestment in the Archdiocese. The dialogue schools provide a space where the Christian voice can be heard with respect and solidarity with others who may not share their religious identity. This dialogue takes differences seriously and works towards understanding for both sides. It is not a perfect school, as no school is; however, through its aspirations, it offers a new path and a fresh perspective for the future. The Dublin Archdiocese could learn much from this option, in which the Catholic faith is presented in an open and engaging manner, introducing the Christian voice into dialogue with others.

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[39] Lieven Boeve, "Theology and Society: The Issue of Catholic Identity," in *Theology at the Crossroads of University, Church, and Society: Dialogue, Difference, and Catholic Identity*, ed. C. Dickinson (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 192.
[40] Boeve, "Theology and Society," 192–93.

In the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum educationis*, we read that the "school has a special importance. It is designed not only to develop with special care the intellectual faculties but also to form the ability to judge rightly, to hand on the cultural legacy of previous generations, to foster a sense of values, to prepare for professional life."[41] In our changing world, I argue that the dialogue school is a good starting point for investigation. Dublin is no longer a place of one faith and one Church. Yet, through faith in dialogue, Catholic education can be an honest and positive possibility for the future of primary religious education in the Archdiocese of Dublin. Through the richness of the Catholic tradition, Christians and those of other faith traditions or none can walk together in harmony and diversity in the community in which they live, learning with and from one another and providing the Ireland of tomorrow with rounded citizens who, in being fully alive (*vivens*), are the glory of God (St Irenaeus).[42]

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[41] Paul VI, *Gravissimum educationis:* Declaration on Christian Education (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.html.

[42] As St Irenaeus said: "the glory of God is a living human being" (*Gloria enim Dei vivens homo; vita autem hominis visio Dei*). Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.20.7, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 490.

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COMMUNICATING GOD IN ADULT ANIMATED SITCOMS:

THE CASE OF *FUTURAMA*'S "GODFELLAS"

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Abstract

This chapter analyses the *Futurama* episode "Godfellas" as a serious site of theological reflection within adult animated sitcoms. Using a communicative hermeneutical and strictly text-internal approach, it explores themes such as idolatry, divine intervention, prayer, free will, and theodicy. Bender's role as the "Metal Lord" functions as a critique of false divinity, illustrated through extensive biblical allusions and the destructive consequences of misguided intervention. The encounter with the God entity presents a non-deterministic model of divine omniscience and restrained action, resonating with process theology. Ultimately, the episode suggests that authentic responsibility lies with humans, while divine action remains indirect and often unrecognisable.

Keywords: Futurama; communication-oriented analysis; divine intervention; idolatry; free will; process theology; prayer.

"When you do things right, people won't be sure you've done anything at all."[1] Thus speaks the "God" entity from the adult animated sitcom *Futurama* (Matt Groening, 1999–present) at the end of the episode "Godfellas" (season 3, episode 20, premiering on March 17, 2002). The name of the episode is a pun on the 1990 American gangster film *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese), while also pointing out the episode's main theme, "fellas becoming God." The "God" entity in this specific episode is a vast, luminous spiral of violet and magenta nebulae, filling the frame and studded with stars and glowing orbs that radiate soft halos of light. At its heart, a brighter circular core pulses gently, giving the impression of an intelligence suspended in space. When the entity meets Bender, the series' cynical,

[1] For this chapter, ChatGPT has primarily been used as a conversational partner and secondarily for the purpose of summarising the plot of the episode "Godfellas."

booze-drinking robot on his endless voyage through space, the two get together to discuss theological themes like free will, prayer, and (the lack of) divine intervention.

Futurama is not the only adult animated television series that features a divine entity, which is usually, but not exclusively or necessarily, based on the Christian concept of God. In *Disenchantment* (also by Matt Groening, 2018–2023), God is an omnipotent creator whose lightbulb-head sustains both His life and the universe's light, so its destruction plunges existence into darkness until it is replaced.[2] In *South Park* (Trey Parker and Matt Stone, 1992–present), God appears as a short-legged tetra-morph combining squirrel, elephant, cat, and hippopotamus traits with an extendable, reptilian tongue, who, among other things, is helping Satan to break off his bad relationship with former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.[3] And in *God, the Devil, and Bob* (Matthew Carlson, 2000), God is a laid-back, Jerry Garcia-styled deity, who casually enjoys junk food while making a Job-esque wager with the Devil to refrain from destroying humanity (again) over the morality of Bob Allman, a deeply flawed but ultimately well-meaning everyman.[4]

Even though their cartoonish appearance might suggest that adult animated sitcoms are aimed at younger audiences, the opposite is true. To varying degrees, these series incorporate profanity, sexual content, graphic violence, and black comedy into familiar sitcom settings (such as families, groups of friends, workplaces, or schools) to exploit culturally established and commercially successful formats while simultaneously questioning, destabilising, and ideally subverting social normativity.[5] *Futurama* clearly falls into that category, as Courtland Lewis argues:

> More than a fish-out-of-water tale, *Futurama* explores a vast array of philosophical themes, including environmentalism, animal liber-

[2] Christopher Chiu-Tabet, "Disenchantment: Matt Groening's Youngest Middle Child," *Multiversity Comics*, September 8, 2023, http://www.multiversitycomics.com/longform/disenchantment.

[3] David Koepsell, "They Satirized my Prophet… Those Bastards! South Park and Blasphemy," in *South Park and Philosophy. You Know, I Learned Something Today*, ed. Robert Arp (London: Blackwell, 2007), 131–140; and David Johnson, "Science, Religion, South Park, and God," in *The Ultimate South Park and Philosophy: Respect My Philosophah!*, ed. Robert Arp and Kevin Decker (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 55–70.

[4] Ramin Zahed, "God the Devil and Bob," *Variety*, March 7, 2000, https://variety.com/2000/tv/reviews/god-the-devil-and-bob-1200461301.

[5] Jessica Kourniakti, "Ancient Greek Mythology and the Culture of the Neohellene in Animated TV Satire," in *Retelling the Past in Contemporary Greek Literature, Film, and Popular Culture*, ed. Trine Willert and Gerasimus Katsan (London: Lexington Books, 2019), 169.

> ation, friendship, sex, love, suicide, freedom, discrimination, corporate deception and greed, language, and time travel. As if that were not enough, they solve real-life mathematical conundrums, talk to God, and provide a satirical narrative that challenges viewers' ways of life.[6]

Futurama's "talk[ing] to God," as Lewis describes, happens most of all in the aforementioned episode "Godfellas." In this chapter, I provide a deep, theological analysis of "Godfellas," opting for a communicative hermeneutical approach as developed by my colleague Archibald van Wieringen and myself.[7] I am strictly interested in the so-called text-internal perspective of this episode, ignoring any interpretations provided by either the creator, Matt Groening, and/or individual critics of said episode. To discuss the episode, I use a script provided by *The Infosphere*.[8] Of course, I am not the first one with an interest in the episode "Godfellas"; other scholars have dedicated their time and effort to interpretation, but a really detailed *theological* analysis has not yet been provided.[9]

First, I introduce the series *Futurama* in general and the episode "Godfellas" in particular (section 1). Secondly, I dissect the episode "Godfellas" into three stages, one focussing on the first half of Bender's adventures in space, where he meets a small civilisation over whom he tries to rule as the "Metal Lord" (section 2.1); one focussing on Bender's subsequent meeting with the God entity (section 2.2); and the last one focussing on Bender's human friends retrieving him from space with the help of several cults and religions (section 2.3). At the end, I draw my theological conclusions.

1. *Futurama* and "Godfellas"

Futurama is an American animated science fiction sitcom created by Matt Groening, the creator of *The Simpsons*, and developed with David X. Cohen. First

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[6] Courtland Lewis, "Futurama as Philosophy. Wisdom from the Ignorance of a Delivery Boy," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Popular Culture as Philosophy*, ed. David Johnson, Dean Kowalski, Chris Lay, and Kimberly Engels (Cham: Palgrave, 2024), 233–34; see also idem and Shaun Young (eds.), *Futurama and Philosophy. Bite My Shiny Metal Axiom* (Chicago: Open Court, 2013) and idem (ed.), *Futurama and Philosophy. Pizza, Paradoxes, and… Good News!* (Owensboro: Courtland Lewis, 2014).

[7] Frank G. Bosman and Archibald van Wieringen, *Video Games as Art: A Communication-Oriented Perspective on the Relationship Between Gaming and the Art* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 12–13, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110731019.

[8] "Transcript: Godfellas," transcript of "Godfellas," last modified April 3, 2014, https://theinfosphere.org/Transcript:Godfellas.

[9] Emily McAvan, *The Postmodern Sacred. Popular Culture Spirituality in the Science Fiction, Fantasy and Urban Fantasy Genres* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012), 64–79; Mark Pinsky, *The Gospel according to the Simpsons. The Spiritual Life of the World's Most Animated Family* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 229–35.

airing in 1999 on Fox, the show has since been revived multiple times on Comedy Central and Hulu, with over 170 episodes spanning ten seasons as of 2025. The series begins with Philip J. Fry, a 25-year-old pizza delivery boy in New York City who is accidentally cryogenically frozen on December 31, 1999 and awakens one thousand years later on December 31, 2999.

The series is essentially a workplace sitcom, revolving around the interplanetary delivery company "Planet Express" and its employees, a small group of eccentric creatures, who all fail to conform in any way or shape to the society of the future. Fry finds employment at Planet Express, run by his distant relative, the idiosyncratic Professor Hubert J. Farnsworth. Besides Fry are—and I will only discuss the relevant crew members here—Turanga Leela, who is a one-eyed but surprisingly competent captain, and Bender "Bending" Rodríguez, a foul-mouthed, alcohol-consuming, and generally very selfish and egocentric robot.

In "Godfellas," Bender is accidentally jettisoned from Planet Express' spaceship into the vastness of empty space. After an undisclosed period of time, an asteroid shower hits Bender, lodging one of the asteroids into Bender's metal chest-plate. This specific asteroid harbours an intelligent civilisation, the Shrimpkins, who—as their name implies—are very small humanoid beings. They consider Bender their godhead, referring to him as "The Metal Lord." Initially Bender exploits their religious fervour for his own benefit—which comes down to producing beer. Later on, Bender develops feelings of caring and sympathy for "his" Shrimpkins, but his crude interventions repeatedly produce unintended but devastating harm. Eventually, when Bender self-consciously refuses to intervene any further, the civilisation splits along theological lines—those who believe in an interventionalist godhead versus those who do not anymore—leading to total nuclear annihilation. Saddened by his inability to save "his" Shrimpkins, Bender continues his voyage alone until he meets the aforementioned God entity, with whom he has several theological discussions, among which are about prayer and divine intervention.

Meanwhile, Leela and Fry try to find Bender in the vastness of empty space. Fry turns, in the following order, to three religious institutions: Father Changstein El-Gamal of the First Amalgamated Church, the Robot Gypsy (actually a scamming robot), and the Monks of T'shuva, who are—according to the Robot Gypsy—"an ancient order that believes God exists somewhere in the depths of space," and are searching for God through its giant telescope located in the Himalayas. Unfortunately, the monks' efforts fail to find Bender (or God). Eventually, Fry's desperate final wish to find his friend inadvertently reaches the God entity, who returns Bender to Earth without overt acknowledgment of doing so. The episode has a happy ending, with all the friends being reunited.

2. Theological Analysis of "Godfellas"

I discuss the episode from a theological perspective in three stages: (1) Bender and the Shrimpkins, (2) Bender and the God entity, and (3) Fry searching for his friend with the help of several cults and religions.

2.1 Bender and the Shrimpkins

In the scenes in which Bender interacts with the Shrimpkins, we see a number of references to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.

The first Shrimpkin Bender encounters in space is named Malachi, an allusion to the prophet associated with the book that bears his name, the last of the twelve minor prophetic books in both the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament.[10] The name Malachi means "my [God's] messenger," an apt name since this Shrimpkin will function as Bender's mouthpiece towards his people, and as their petitioner towards their "Metal Lord." The Shrimpkin improvises somewhat when explaining his name as "He who really loves the Metal Lord." The biblical Malachi is highly critical of the lukewarm priests in Jerusalem (Malachi 1:6–2:9) and—in the vein of many other biblical prophets—accuses Israel of being unfaithful to their God, instead "marrying" other, false ones.[11] This theme is reprised much later in the episode, when Bender turns his attention to a Shrimpkin erotic cinema called "Ezekiel's nasty house," a reference to yet another prophetic book of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.[12] Ezekiel is even more strongly worded than Malachi: in chapters 16 and 23, Ezekiel explicitly describes (the cities of) Jerusalem and Samaria (as a *pars pro toto* for all the Israelites) as engaging with idols (Ezekiel 16:17,36; 23:7), sacrificing children to false godheads (Ezekiel 16:20–21,36), and prostituting themselves freely to everyone available.[13] Both references, to Malachi and Ezekiel, identify and classify Bender as a false godhead, to whom his people pray to and rely on in vain.

[10] Julia O'Brien, "The Book of Malachi," in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul Achtemeier (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1985), 645–46; Andrew Hill, "Book of Malachi," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

[11] Stephen Baba, *Malachi's Understanding of Unfaithfulness in Covenantal Marriage Relationships* (Carlisle: Langham, 2025).

[12] Werner Lemke, "Ezekiel," in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul Achtemeier (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1985), 320–22; Lawrence Boadt, "Book of Ezekiel," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

[13] Johanna Stiebert, "The Woman Metaphor of Ezekiel 16 and 23. A Victim of Violence, or a Symbol of Subversion?" *Old Testament Essays* 15, no. 1 (2002): 200–208.

In the episode, Malachi is also associated with Moses, especially in his capacity as the bringer of the Law that would later be named after him.[14] As soon as Bender finds out he has a divine hold over the Shrimpkins, he immediately puts them to work for his own egoistic benefit. He says: "Malachi, it's high time I laid down a few commandments. You got a chisel? Take this down. Number one..."; this is a clear reference to the pivotal biblical moment when the Israelites were given the two stone tablets inscribed by God with the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17; Deuteronomy 5:6–21). Bender's commandment is a single one: make beer for the Metal Lord.

In the next cut, there is a giant brewery, producing Lordweizer beer (a pun on Budweiser beer). All the resources of the small asteroid are used to produce the factory and the beer, maiming many a Shrimpkin, including Malachi, who loses an arm during the whole project, and stimulating organised crime (a reference to American mob-infused prohibition politics). Again, this is a disqualification by the episode of Bender's selfish actions.

Bender's religious title is "Metal Lord," a title he is referred to many times by various Shrimpkins. At one point, the episode features a yellow cloth with the embroidered words: "Metal Lord is my metal shepherd," a clear reference to Psalm 23:1. In another instance, Malachi's family is reading what appears to be the Shrimpkin version of the Christian Bible. It features Bender fighting a lion bare-handedly, a reference to Samson's slaying of a lion in Judges 14; on its cover, the book has "BENDER with MALACHI." This detail plays with the theological theme of the question of authorship regarding the Bible as "the Word of God": was it God's work exclusively, or a divinely-inspired human enterprise, or both at the same time? And, of course, Bender is everything but a "good shepherd," either from the Old or the New Testament perspective, since he is not tending to his flock but exploiting them.

Finally moved by the suffering that he has put the Shrimpkins through for his own benefit, Bender starts to cry. This causes a huge deluge-like flood to spill over the small asteroid, destroying fields and property and jeopardising the lives of several Shrimpkins. When Malachi junior, a particularly fervent believer in the power of the Metal Lord, is in danger of drowning, Bender intervenes—for the first time in a positive way—and saves the young boy. This immediately leads to a new set of problems, since all the other Shrimpkins are now praying and petitioning Bender to intervene in their plights too. Malachi observes: "They saw you save my son. Now everyone is praying for their own miracles."

Initially, Bender is keen to help other Shrimpkins too. Bender: "Very well. What do they want?" The first group prays for wealth, to which Bender answers by flipping a coin onto the village. The coin, being a massive block in the eyes of the Shrimpkins, smashes into a couple of houses and fields, destroying the little

[14] Adele Berlin, "Moses," in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul Achtemeier (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1985), 704–8; Dewey Beegle, "Moses," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

they had left after their earlier ordeals. Bender, self-consciously, replies to his own failure with: "Um, that was a practice miracle. Who's next?" The second group prays for sunlight for their barley to grow better, ironically to make more beer for the Metal Lord. Bender, quoting from Genesis 1:3, "let there be light," answers their prayer by redirecting sunlight directly onto the fields, scorching and burning the crops as well as the Shrimpkins asking for divine intervention. Bender tries to remedy his failure by blowing out the fire, causing several Shrimpkins to be blown off the asteroid, sending them to certain death in the vacuum of space. Witnessing his second failure of being a "good shepherd," Bender remarks: "Um, when you're writing the Bible, you might want to omit that last miracle."

After these experiences, Bender refrains from intervening any longer, ignoring the prayers of his flock. When confronted by Malachi, he answers: "Malachi, every time I interfere, I only make things worse. You're best off solving your own problems." This stance has two (unintended) effects. Firstly, the Shrimpkins split into two religious factions, one of them—living on Bender's unseen back—disappointed by the absence of the divine intervention they prayed for, while the other faction—on Bender's belly—keep believing in their Metal Lord. Secondly, the disappointed faction—one could argue the "atheist" faction—starts a nuclear war against their "theist" neighbours, leading to mutual annihilation.

Malachi tries one more time to convince his Lord to intervene on their behalf: "I beseech thee. Rise up against them. Smite someone who deserves it for once." This last part is a reference to the theological theme of theodicy: the problem of reconciling the existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God with the persistent presence of evil and unjust suffering in the world, here expressed through Malachi's frustrated plea for selective divine justice rather than indiscriminate wrath.[15]

2.2 Bender and the God Entity

At the end of the Shrimpkin episode, Bender is utterly alone again. He is mourning them and the difficulty of playing God: "They're dead. All dead. Who would have known playing God could have such terrible consequences?" After an undisclosed period of time, Bender is met by another entity floating through space—the aforementioned God entity. When the two beings meet, the entity tries to communicate in binary, a language that Bender—ironically for a robot—does not know. But when requested to do so by Bender, the entity switches to English. Bender asks it: "What are you? Some kind of galactic computer?" And later: "Are you God?" and "or both?" The entity answers with an evasive "possibl[y]." The question "who built you?" is answered by "I have always been," a possible reference to the meaning of the divine Tetragrammaton, first revealed to—again—

[15] Paul Vermeer, *Learning Theodicy: The Problem of Evil and the Praxis of Religious Education* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

Moses (Exodus 3:14–15).[16] The entity acknowledges that it "do[es] feel compassion for all living things," apparently a characteristic that is enough to qualify anything as God itself, and resonating with many texts from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.[17]

The second "theological" discussion between Bender and the God entity is extremely short, but very interesting. I quote it in its entirety:

Bender:	So, do you know what I'm gonna do before I do it?
God entity:	Yes.
Bender:	What if I do something different?
God entity:	Then I don't know that.

At first, the entity seems to affirm complete foreknowledge, reflecting the classical theological claim of divine omniscience, according to which God knows all future contingents.[18] Bender immediately raises the traditional problem of foreknowledge and free will: "What if I do something different?" The punchline implicitly rejects a deterministic reading of omniscience. When the entity responds, "Then I don't know that," he implies that his knowledge tracks actual choices, not hypothetical alternatives. He knows what Bender will do as long as Bender freely does it; the moment Bender genuinely chooses otherwise, the content of divine knowledge changes accordingly.

The third and longest theological conversation between Bender and the God entity is about prayer and divine intervention, a topic the former feels very strongly about, given his recent experiences with the Shrimpkins. Benders says: "It was awful. I tried helping them, I tried not helping them but in the end I couldn't do them any good. Do you think what I did was wrong?" The entity's approach to this topic is rather balanced. First it acknowledges that there are indeed a lot of people praying to it, "but there are so many asking so much; after a while, you just sorta tune it out." After that, it reassures Bender that "being God isn't easy. If you do too much, people get dependent on you. And if you do nothing, they lose hope."

After this rather intelligent point, the comedy element of "Godfellas" kicks in by associating this careful approach to divine intervention with two rather worldly analogies. The entity explains: "You have to use a light touch like a safecracker or a pickpocket." To which Bender replies: "Or a guy who burns down the bar for the insurance money." The God entity affirms this rather unethical approach: "Yes, if you make it look like an electrical thing." But it concludes

[16] Leo Perdue, "Names of God in the Old Testament," in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul Achtemeier (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1985), 736–38.

[17] Richard Hiers, *Nature and Creation: Biblical Perspectives on Life Here on Planet Earth* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2023), 36–37.

[18] William Craig, *The Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents from Aristotle to Suarez* (Leiden: Brill, 1988).

again on a more serious note: "When you do things right, people won't be sure you've done anything at all."

The God entity cannot help Bender, however, to return to Earth, since Bender does not know which way Earth is, again suggesting that God's divine omniscience is "limited" by the actualisation of the free will of individual human beings. In this regard, the episode borders on the concept of process theology.[19] In process theology, God does not possess exhaustive, timeless knowledge of all future contingents but instead knows reality as it unfolds through concrete events and free agents. God can act within creation but only on the basis of what has been actualised, disclosed, or chosen. Bender's ignorance therefore becomes a real epistemic limit, even for God. It is only when the God entity hears Fry's "prayer" (see next section), that it is able to send Bender home, urging him to "remember what we talked about."

2.3 Fry's Religious Search for Bender

While Bender is having his encounters with the Shrimpkins and the God entity, back on Earth, Fry and Leela are trying to find and rescue their metal friend. Fry cries out: "I can't believe you're gone. I won't! If I can't reach you physically, I'll just have to try something desperate and crazy!" And in tune with the themes of the rest of the episode, this "desperate and crazy" action consists of travelling to various forms of institutionalised religion within *Futurama*'s extended universe.

First stop is Father Changstein El-Gamal of the First Amalgamated Church (FAC). The FAC's building features a Buddha-esque figure (cf. Buddhism) with a Star of David (cf. Judaism) in one hand and a cross in the other (cf. Christianity), a crescent moon above his head (cf. Islam), and two times four multi-coloured stars; indeed an amalgamation of various historical religions. Fry asks the Father if there is anything that "religion can do to help me find my friend?" When the Father suggests they could pray together, Fry reacts sceptically: "Is there anything useful we could do?" To which the Father, very self-consciously, answers: "no." Ironically enough, Bender and the God entity are discussing the same thing, namely the effectiveness of prayer and the difficulties of divine intervention. In the end it is prayer that brings Bender back to Earth, but only when the prayer is implicitly uttered, instead of explicitly and then waiting for a direct answer.

The second stop is a "gypsy fortune teller," a robotic vending-machine at a fancy fair, accepting coins for prophecies and predictions about the future. The thing is utterly crooked: it pronounces Bender's name as "Bonder"—something one would not expect from a machine that really has supernatural powers. When Fry confronts the robotic vending-machine, it replies with a cynical: "Look, you want false hope or not?" Fry answers with: "Only if you don't have any real hope." The fortune teller, however, has a somewhat useful suggestion, that is, to

[19] Bruce Epperly, *Process Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

visit the Monks of T'shuva (Hebrew for "repentance"). This meaning is significant in the course of the episode's story, since it was Fry who—accidentally and in panic—pulled the lever that shot Bender into space (even though Bender was not supposed to be in that tube in the first place). Fry is feeling guilty about his part in the disappearance of his robotic friend. The fortune teller explains that these monks are of "an ancient order that believes God exists somewhere in the depths of space." These monks have built the "universe's most powerful radio telescope to search for him."

The third stop is the monastery of the Monks of T'shuva, high in the Himalaya mountains. Fry and Leela question the monks, who claim to have been looking into space for the last 700 years, examining only "one ten-millionth of the sky." Nevertheless, they are undeterred: "we will go on until we find the Almighty, even if it takes till the end of time." To what purpose, Fry asks. "Then we utter unto him a short prayer," their answer is. The discovery of God seems to be an end goal in and of itself. When Fry tries to persuade the monks to let him use the telescope to look for Bender, they refuse. But Fry insists: "Aw, come on! You guys have forever to look for God. All I'm asking is one measly lifetime to find my friend." The monks seem impressed, since one of them suggests: "He speaks out of love for his friend. Perhaps that love in his heart is God." But others are not convinced, reacting sarcastically (and ironically): "Oh, how convenient! A theory about God that doesn't require looking through a telescope. Get back to work!" Fry and Leela lock the monks in a closet, with nothing to eat but their shoes, in order to continue their search for Bender through their telescope.

After three days—an important number in this context, suggesting a link with the traditional three days between Jesus' death and resurrection—Leela tries to convince Fry to give up on his search for Bender: "…even if you stay here the rest of your life, there is virtually no chance of finding him. It's time to give up." Fry reluctantly agrees: "You're right. I'm never gonna see him again. (…) [S]till, I wish I had Bender back." It is this implicit prayer that the God entity receives and then acts upon by sending Bender back to Earth.

Once Fry, Leela, and Bender are united, Bender relates his adventures in a very concise way: "Guys, you'll never believe what happened. First I was God, then I met God!" Then, Fry remembers they locked all the monks up in the closet, but he is reluctant to let them out: "I mean, they're monks. I'm sure their God will let them out or at least give them more shoes to eat." But Bender, having the lesson he has been taught still fresh in his memory, rebukes Fry's fatalism and blind belief in God's omniscience and intervention: "Fat chance! You can't count on God for jack. He pretty much told me so himself. Now come on. If we don't save those monks, no one will!" The scene cuts back to the God entity, still hovering in the emptiness of space, concluding: "When you do things right, people won't be sure you've done anything at all."

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided a theological analysis of the *Futurama* episode "Godfellas" from a strictly text-internal perspective, using a communicative hermeneutical approach. Rather than approaching the episode primarily as satire or a parody on (institutionalised) religion per se—which could be tempting at a superficial level—"Godfellas" stages a coherent and surprisingly nuanced theological reflection on a number of classical themes, most notably idolatry, divine intervention, prayer, free will, and human responsibility. The episode does not merely ridicule religious belief, nor does it straightforwardly affirm a particular theological system, either Christian, Jewish, or other, but instead explores several competing theological intuitions.

Firstly, Bender's role as the self-styled "Metal Lord" of the Shrimpkins functions as an extended critique of false divinity in general. Through numerous explicit and implicit references to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament—particularly prophetic traditions associated with Malachi and Ezekiel, Moses, and the Good Shepherd—Bender is consistently framed as a false godhead who fails precisely where biblical theology locates true divinity: care for the vulnerable, restraint in the use of power, and faithfulness to those who depend on him. Bender's attempts at intervention, whether motivated by selfishness, pity, or moral reflection, repeatedly result in unintended destruction and chaos. Even his final decision to refrain from intervention altogether leads not to peace, but to division and total annihilation.

Secondly, there is the encounter between Bender and the God entity. Here, the narrative abandons much of its caricature in favour of a more reflective exploration of classical divine attributes. The God entity resists clear categorisation: it affirms being transcendent (God in the classical sense) and immanent (a computer) at the same time, it claims to have omniscient foreknowledge but rejects determinism, and it refuses to intervene but does intervene nevertheless. Likewise, the discussion of prayer and intervention presents a tension: too much intervention fosters dependency, while complete non-intervention risks the loss of all hope. Divine action, according to the internal logic of the episode, must therefore remain indirect, restrained, and often unrecognisable as such.

Thirdly, Fry's parallel search for Bender through various forms of institutionalised religion further reinforces the episode's subtle but critical position. Religious institutions in "Godfellas" are portrayed as either aware of their own limitations, cynically exploitative of others, or singularly focused on God as an immanent object of empirical discovery, rather than as a mystical presence or relation. Significantly, the episode suggests that explicit, instrumental prayer is ineffective, while Fry's implicit wish—uttered without an expectation of response—does reach the God entity and prompts action. Prayer, in this narrative, is not depicted as a reliable means of securing divine intervention, but as an expression

of relational longing rather than control of something that can be controlled or demanded.

In this sense, "Godfellas" demonstrates that adult animated sitcoms can function as meaningful sites of theological reflection, of "communicating God." By embedding complex theological questions within a comedic narrative, the episode invites viewers not to resolve these tensions, but to reflect on them. The God of "Godfellas" remains elusive, restrained, and difficult to instrumentalise. Precisely in this refusal to offer clear answers, the episode proves to be theologically productive.

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FÜR EINE THEOLOGIE DER BEZIEHUNG

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Abstract

Karl Rahner hat für die Zukunft des Christen deutliche Worte gewählt: ohne Mystik, ohne Innerlichkeit wird es kein Christentum geben können. Wir könnten hinzufügen, dass es zu keiner Zeit möglich war, ohne authentische Innerlichkeit ein christliches Leben zu führen, weil es dem Menschen nicht immer gelingt, aus Liebe und für die Liebe zu handeln, ohne Gott existentiell zu vertrauen.
Rahners Gedanke erscheint wenige Jahrzehnte nach seinen Überlegungen besonders aktuell zu sein. Auch J. Ratzingers Intuition, dass die nahe Zukunft der Kirche sich in kleinen Gruppen von Gemeinschaften ereignen würde, weil ein veräußerlichter Glaube nicht trägt, scheint prophetisch gewesen zu sein.

Schlüsselwörter: Madeleine Delbrêl; Theologie der Beziehung; Mystik; Laienspiritualität; Gebet; Evangelisierung; Säkularisierung; christliches Zeugnis.

Hinführung zum Thema

Zu den oben erwähnten Gestalten des 20. Jahrhunderts bietet sich eine dritte große Persönlichkeit des vergangenen Jahrhunderts an, zu den folgenden Überlegungen vorgestellt zu werden: die französische Sozialarbeiterin und Schriftstellerin, Madeleine Delbrêl. Mit ihrem Anliegen und ihren Reflexionen sowie ihrer Lebensweise war sie nicht nur eine Vorläuferin des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils, Annette Schleinzer nannte sie „Prophetin der Nachkonzilszeit“[1] Schon lange bevor es Säkularinstitute gab (erst seit 1947), wollte Madeleine Delbrêl als Welt-Christin das gewöhnliche Leben der Menschen teilen. Sie entdeckte die Bedeutung der Laien schon 30 Jahre vor dem Zweiten Vaticanum und nahm ihre Lebensweise vorweg, um wirksam Salz der Erde zu sein. Auch der Titel des Sozialarbeiters war in Frankreich erst 1932

[1] Madeleine Delbrêl, *Deine Augen in unseren Augen: Die Mystik der Leute von der Straße. Ein Lesebuch*, ed. Annette Schleinzer (Munich: Verlag Neue Stadt, 2015), 8.

offiziell anerkannt; damit wollte sie sich in der Gesellschaft engagieren, um den anwesenden Menschen Christus zu sein.[2]

Der Ruf zu den Marxisten in Ivry

In ihrer Jugend selbst Atheistin, hat sie durch eine tiefe Gotteserfahrung zu Gott gefunden – sie hat sich von Gott finden lassen, deswegen hatte sie die Sehnsucht, ihr gnadenhaftes Glück mit anderen teilen zu dürfen. Ihre schriftstellerische Karriere gab sie auf und zog mit Freundinnen nach Ivry, eine Vorstadt von Paris. wo Kommunisten lebten. Ihre missionarische Leidenschaft führte sie dorthin, um unter ihnen „Gott einen Ort zu sichern" und wurde zur „Mystikerin der Straße",[3] zu einer faszinierenden „Pionierin des Glaubens in einer säkularisierten Welt"[4] Mittlerweile ist sie nicht nur bekannt—in Frankreich wird für sie ein Seligsprechungsprozess angestrebt, um ihr Lebenszeugnis noch intensiver den Menschen von heute zugänglich zu machen.

Die Initialzündung des Glaubens an den rettenden, liebenden Gott im Leben von Madeleine Delbrêl war so intensiv, dass sie ihr höchstes Glück, wie sie es nannte, nicht für sich behalten konnte. Ihre apostolische Berufung führte sie unter Atheisten, wo sie eine starke Auseinandersetzung mit den Marxisten in Ivry führte. In diesem Milieu hatte sie nur zwei Möglichkeiten zur Auswahl: entweder in aller Kühnheit im Glauben lebensfähig bleiben, oder aufhören, christlich zu sein.[5] Dieses radikale entweder-oder ist der gegenwärtigen Toleranz-Kultur eher fremd. Jahrzehnte nach ihrem Tod, aus heutiger Perspektive betrachtet, in einem weitgehend entchristlichten Europa ist ihre Einstellung zur Mission als Ganzhingabe beispielhaft. Sie verlangt vom Christen im Reden und im Handeln das Opfer seines Selbst. Das Maß der Selbsthingabe ist für Madeleine Delbrêl das Martyrium. Der Grund dafür ist kein sentimentaler, emotionaler, sondern die feste Überzeugung, dass die menschliche Vernunft nach Sinnhaftigkeit verlangt. Selbst der angenhmste Wohlstand würde in ihrem Verständnis einen Hunger der Verzweiflung hinterlassen, den nur Gott ausfüllen kann. Dieser Verzweiflung im Leben der Mitmenschen Vorschub zu leisten, hieße für sie, die Liebe zu Gott und zu den Menschen zu verraten. Der hohe Stellenwert des christlichen Zeugnisses in der Konfrontation mit den Marxisten bedeutet für Madeleine Delbrêl die Notwendigkeit, ihnen auf der Ebene des Faktischen zu begegnen. Atheisten bemessen nämlich den Wert ihrer Lehre an Fakten. Das Christentum – Christus und die Kirche – muss ihnen deswegen auch ein Faktum anbieten, und zwar das

[2] Siehe Katja Boehme, *Madeleine Delbrêl. Die andere Heilige.* (Freiburg Br.: Herder, 2004), 49, 57, 48.
[3] Boehme, *Madeleine Delbrêl,* 10.
[4] Rosemarie Nürnberg, *Anders beten. Impulse von Madeleine Delbrêl* (München, Zürich, Wien: Verlag Neue Stadt, 2015), 11.
[5] Siehe Madeleine Delbrêl, *Auftrag des Christen in einer Welt ohne Gott* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 2016), 108.

ungewohnte Faktum des Glaubens an Gott. Madeleine Delbrêl unterscheidet vermutlich das historisch und innerweltlich Faktische vom Faktum des christlichen Glaubens, das für die Vernunft nicht beweisbar ist. Das fordert umso mehr das Zeugnis des Lebens eines Christen heraus, mit Worten und im Handeln. Das graue Christentum fordert sie zum wahrnehmbaren Lebenszeugnis auf, damit die Menschen in unserer Umgebung Gottes Liebe erfahren können. In ihrer Auseinandersetzung macht sie das Beispiel Lenins, der auf ganz Europa durch seinen überzeugten Atheismus einwirken wollte, zum Beispiel des Apostolats.[6]

Die Liebe zu den Atheisten motivierte Madeleine Delbrêl zu Überlegungen zur christlichen Berufung der Evangelisierung, die sie als normale Reaktion auf die Entchristlichung ansah. Die Dringlichkeit der Verkündigung entdeckte sie lange bevor sich das Konzil in der Konstitution Gaudium et spes mit dem Atheismus auseinander gesetzt und ein christliches Schuldbekenntnis darin abgelegt hat. Verkündigung gehört für sie nicht zu fakultativen Praktiken oder zur tugendhaften Ergänzung des christlichen Lebens.

Bezüglich der Schwierigkeiten, die einem in der apostolischen Verkündigung begegnen können, betont Madeleine Delbrêl, dass die Suche nach Mitteln nicht mit der Arbeit zu verwechseln sei. Wenn einen die Sorge quält, nicht aufmerksam und erfinderisch genug zu sein, kann diese Angst als Wachstumserscheinung betrachtet werden, allerdings verlangt Gott von seinen reifen Missionaren in erster Linie den Gehorsam.[7] Madeleine Delbrêl kann in der heutigen Verkündigung ermutigen, nicht nur neue Wege der Evangelisierung zu suchen, sondern das Wesen des Evangeliums im Focus zu behalten, vor allem dem Kerygma treu zu bleiben.

Wirksamkeit durch das Wort Gottes

Madeleine Delbrêl war es bewußt, dass Werke der Liebe zwar unerlässlich sind, aber das Entscheidende durch das Wort Gottes in den Herzen geschieht. Gottes Wort will überall in den Straßen, Häusern und in den Begegnungen Wohnen und zu Hause sein. „Das Wort Gottes trägt man nicht in einem Köfferchen bis zum Ende der Welt, sondern man trägt es in sich, man nimmt es in sich mit auf den Weg... Man lässt es bis auf den Grund seiner Selbst sinken, bis zu dem Dreh- und Angelpunkt, um den sich unser ganzes Selbst dreht. Missionar sein kann man nur, wenn man dem Wort Gottes, dem Evangelium, in sich selbst einen offenen, weiten, herzlichen Empfang bereitet hat.“[8] Für Madeleine Delbrêl gibt es eine ernsthafte Voraussetzung der missionarischen Berufung und Tätigkeit: man muss ganz von Gott und von seinem Wort durchdrungen sein, sonst wäre Evangelisierung nur menschlicher Aktivismus, der nicht fruchtbar sein kann.

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[6] Siehe Delbrêl, *Auftrag des Christen in einer Welt ohne Gott,* 106–107, 99–100.
[7] Siehe Delbrêl, *Auftrag des Christen in einer Welt ohne Gott,* 102, 98.
[8] Gilles Francois und Bernard Pitaud. Hg. Annette Schleinzer. *Madeleine Delbrêl. Evangelium pur! Begegnungen*. (München, Zürich, Wien: Verlag Neue Stadt, 2025), 19–20.

Lob der Einsamkeit in Gottes Gegenwart

Die apostolische Einsamkeit kann das Anliegen der Verkündigung herausfordern, wenn es nicht in einer missionarischen Gemeinschaft möglich ist, zu leben. Auf diese Einsamkeit wird der Christ zwar nicht vorbereitet, aber in der atheistischen Umwelt muss er sogar seinen Glauben oft alleine leben – ob in der Wüste, oder in Gemeinschaften in der Welt. Die Einsamkeit in der Masse ist ein gegenwärtiges Phänomen, das es für den Glauben zu ertragen gilt. Der Sinn der christlichen Einsamkeit liegt für Madeleine Delbrêl darin, einen freien Durchgang für Gott zu ermöglichen. Letztendlich kann auch das Gebet ohne Einsamkeit nicht fruchtbar werden. Die Einsamkeit macht mit den notleidenden Menschen solidarisch.[9] In ihrem Verständnis der Einsamkeit als apostolische Qualität ist die Berufung Ch. de Foucaulds unübersehbar.[10]

Delbrêl beschreibt Einsamkeit sehr originell und verbindet sie mit Gottes Gegenwart: „Die Einsamkeit, o mein Gott, besteht nicht darin, daß wir allein sind, sondern darin, daß Du da bist, denn vor dir sinkt alles in Tod, oder alles wird du.“[11] Der tieferen Reflexion bedarf auch ihr weiterer Gedanke über das allein sein: „Allein sein heißt nicht, die Menschen hinter sich gelassen oder sie verlassen zu haben: allein sein heißt wissen, daß du groß bist, mein Gott.“[12] Abgeschiedenheit von Menschen, um Gott zu begegnen, ist für sie nicht die Lösung, nicht der Weg in das geistliche Leben, sie ist eine Verfechterin der Einheit von Gottes- und Nächstenliebe. Die erneut paradoxe Formulierung der Einsamkeit im Wissen um die Größe Gottes verweist auf Gottes allumfassende, umhüllende Liebe in einer besonderen Qualität des Allein-Seins.

Die außergewöhnliche Qualität der von Delbrêl formulierten Einsamkeit macht sie für die verschiedenen Dimensionen des Gebetes fruchtbar. Sie äußerte sich zum 1/ Ort, dem 2/ Zeitpunkt sowie zur Zeitdauer des Gebetes und reflektierte über die 3/ Art und Weise des Gebetes in den rasch sich verändernden Lebensumständen des heutigen Menschen. Das Gebet können wir als Angelpunkt ihrer Spiritualität betrachten und zugleich in der Tradition des „inneren Gebetes“ verankern, das in allen vergangenen Jahrhunderten des Christentums von den Wüstenvätern über Teresa von Avila (die unter den Kochtöpfen ihr Gebet ausübte) bis zur Gegenwart anwesend ist. Große Gestalten des christlichen Glaubens zu allen Zeiten entdeckten die von ihr verstandenen und neu formulierten praktischen Seiten der Art, sich innerlich mit Gott zu verbinden.

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[9] Siehe Madeleine Delbrêl, *Frei für Gott* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1991), 73–79.
[10] Siehe Gilles Francois und Bernard Pitaud. *Madeleine Delbrêl. Die Biographie* (München, Zürich, Wien: Verlag Neue Stadt, 2019), 202–3.

[11] Madeleine Delbrêl, *Gebet in einem weltlichen Leben* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1979), 115.
[12] Delbrêl, *Gebet in einem weltlichen Leben,* 115.

M. Delbrêl ist sechzig Jahre nach ihrem Tod in ihrer Lebensweise aktueller denn je. Sie ist eine moderne „Heilige", die die Fähigkeit bekommen hat, in erster Linie Gottes Gegenwart überall wahrzunehmen und die deswegen dafür plädiert, Gott nicht speziell in der Wüste, hinter Mauern, die uns von der Welt trennen, oder in besonderen Berufungen zu suchen, sondern ihn unabhängig von einer zurückgezogenen Lebensart zu finden. Die universale Gültigkeit dieser ihrer Entdeckung durchdringt ihr Denken, Beten und Tun. Geradezu paradoxe Ausdrucksweisen sind ihr geläufig: „Mein Gott, wenn Du doch überall bist, wie kommt es dann, dass ich so oft woanders bin."[13] Dadurch kann der Leser ihrer Werke eine Vielfalt von Dimensionen der Realität des schwachen Menschen, aber auch die Absurdität des unaufmerksamen Umgangs mit Gott, wahrnehmen. Ihr Rat für die eigene volle Präsenz ist, „Ganz da zu sein, wo man ist: Das ist das Geheimnis, überall sein zu können."[14] Die Relativierung einer Notwendigkeit des Rückzugs, um Gott zu begegnen, gehört zu Delbrêls Glaubensüberzeugung, die allen Menschen *universal* anwendbar ist. In der Verbindung mit der Berufung eines jeden Menschen bedeutet dies, dass sie vor allem nicht die Art der Berufung, sondern unsere Antwort darauf herausstellt: Wichtig ist es, sich bedingungslos, treu darauf einzulassen, was die Heiligkeit bewirkt (nicht die Berufung als solche bewirkt sie).[15]

In der Laienspiritualität der M. Delbrêl ist die Begegnung im Alltag eines der Hauptthemen. Beleuchten wir deshalb die erwähnten Aspekte des Gebetes in ihrem Denken näher. Wie schon erwähnt, sucht Madeleine Delbrêl Gott im Gespräch nicht hinter Klostermauern, an ausgewählten Orten, sie benennt eher die Weite der Gegenwart Gottes in der Klausur des eigenen Herzens. Ihn dort zu finden erfordert Akte des Glaubens.

Spiritualität und Gebet im Alltag

In ihren Überlegugen zur Dauer des Gebetes hat sie Verständnis für beschäftigte Christen, die Gott keine langen Gebete vortragen können und vergleicht deswegen die aktiven Akte jeder Verbindung mit Gott mit dem Atemzug, der zu unserer Natur gehört. Jeder Seufzer zu Gott hat die gleiche Qualität, wie das stundenlange Beten, wenn es in der Hingabe geschieht, die sie nährt und zugleich ihre Frucht sein kann. Solche kurze Pausen der Reflexion verwandeln und durchleuchten den Tag ganz und vertiefen das, was die Tradition „inneres Gebet" nennt. Intensive Momente der Hingabe heiligen die Zeit, die Gott schenkt. Häufige, bewusste Atemzüge zu Gott führen also keineswegs zu einer Oberflächlichkeit, sondern zur größeren Intimität der Beziehung.

[13] Madeleine Delbrêl, *Auf den Straßen der Welt verbirgt sich Gott*, ed. Otto Georgens (Munich, Zurich, and Vienna: Verlag Neue Stadt, 2020), 17.
[14] Delbrêl, *Auf den Straßen der Welt verbirgt sich Gott*, 44.
[15] Siehe Delbrêl, *Auf den Straßen der Welt verbirgt sich Gott*, 49.

Tiefsinnige Formulierungen finden sich in ihrem Werk über die Art, wie man als Christ in der Welt beten soll und auch kann. Überraschend einfach sagt sie: „Zum Gebet gehen wie auf den Markt, wenn man Hunger hat und ein schwerer Tag bevorsteht."[16] Im Bewusstsein dessen, wie die Arbeitsbelastung die meisten Menschen dazu führt, sich im Gebet knapp auszudrücken, spricht sie von einer Tiefenbohrung: „Heutzutage ist in manchem städtischen Leben das Gebet nur durch Bohrungen möglich, wobei Intensität die Dauer ersetzt. Solch kräftiges, verborgenes Hinabtauchen strebt in der Tiefe zu Gott hin, in konzentrierten Akten des Glaubens, der Hoffnung und der Liebe."[17] So wird das Gebet zur Quelle des Lebens. Sie hat auch keine Schwierigkeit, dem ermüdeten Christen vorzuschlagen, im Liegen zu beten.[18] um sich ganz gesammelt Gott hinzuwenden. Sie Rät zur verantwortungsvollen Kreativität bei der Suche nach der je eigenen geeigneten Form des Betens. Die alle Betenden vereinende Motivation soll die sehnsuchtsvolle Liebe sein, die das Gebet nährt, wie Feuer. Mit ihren Worten: „Diese Sehnsucht macht das Gebet aus, und zwar gleichgültig, wo. Jede Liebe trägt ihre Sehnsucht überall mit sich herum."[19] Madeleine Delbrêl vergleicht das Gebet mit einer Liebesbeziehung, in der zwei Liebende alles dransetzen, miteinander Zeit zu verbringen – es geht um keinerlei Leistung, oder Persolvierung von Gebeten, sondern um die Freiheit der Liebe, die Gelegenheiten zur Gemeinschaft sucht. Um die Beziehung zu stärken und zu vertiefen, dienen alle bisher ausgeführten Aspekte des Gebetes, die zugleich zu Taten anspornen.

Die lebendige Beziehung zu Gott. die vom Gebet genährt wird, ist der Weg der Suche nach dem Willen Gottes und zu Entscheidungen als Frucht der Unterscheidung der Geister.[20] Aus ihrer intimen Beziehung zu Gott folgt ihre Bereitschaft, den Menschen im Arbeitermilieu nahe zu sein.[21] Sie ist überzeugt „Daß ein allmächtiger Gott, der doch geliebt sein will, seinen Kindern eine Lebensart gäbe, in der sie ihn nicht lieben könnten, unausdenkbar ist."[22] In ihrer Annäherung an die Atheisten versucht sie ihnen Gott zu vermitteln, damit sie ihn auch lieben können. Die barmherzige Verhaltensweise gehört für Madeleine Delbrêl zur Nachfolge Christi um ihm ähnlich zu werden und so das geschwisterliche Reich Gottes zu bauen. Es kommt auf jeden einzelnen an. Gute

[16] Madeleine Delbrêl, *Die Liebe ist unteilbar* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 2020), 86.
[17] Madeleine Delbrêl, *Gebet in einem weltlichen Leben* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1979), 82.
[18] Siehe Delbrêl, *Gebet in einem weltlichen Leben,* 83.
[19] Delbrêl, *Gebet in einem weltlichen Leben,* 64.
[20] Siehe Annette Schleinzer, "Zu jeder Stunde eine Wahl treffen: Unterscheidung der Geister – ein Lebensthema Madeleine Delbrêls (1904–1964)," *Erbe und Auftrag* 98, no. 3 (2022): 269–80.
[21] Siehe Schleinzer, *„Zu jeder Stunde eine Wahl treffen",* 270.
[22] Delbrêl, *Gebet in einem weltlichen Leben,* 51.

zwischenmenschliche Beziehungen sind für sie trotz Unvollkommenheit des Menschen nicht utopisch, denn sie sind durch Vergebung erreichbar.[23]

Humorvolle Weisheit zur universalen Heiligung

Madeleine Delbrêl findet durch ihre Kreativität eine liebevolle Art, auf die Unvollkommenheiten und Fehler des Menschen in verschiedenen Lebenssituationen hinzuweisen: sie erfindet eine ausgeprägte Gestalt: „Der kleine Mönch" erfüllt dafür eine exemplarische Aufgabe. An ihm zeigt sie uns allen, wo wir uns auf dem Weg zur Heiligkeit befinden und wo offensichtlich nicht. Sie hinterfragt durch ihn mit treffenden Beispielen unsere Gedanken, Einstellungen und Taten und praktiziert dabei die Unterscheidung der Geister auf eine sehr leicht verständliche, plastische Art.

Einige konkrete Beispiele aus diesem kreativen Büchlein können die offenbarende Kunst von Madeleine Delbrêl manifestieren. Alcide, der kleine Mönch ist ein Spiegel z.B. zur Haltung der Demut, die alle Christen auf irgendeine Weise anstreben. Den verdeckten Hochmut beschreibt sie mit folgenden Worten: „Man feiert seine Kleinheit wie der Sieger der Tour de France seinen Sieg. Man meint, etwas Besonderes geleistet zu haben. Man ist fasziniert von seiner eigenen Kleinheit. So merkt man gar nicht, wie man zwar von seiner Kleinheit spricht, aber eigentlich seine Größe und seine spirituelle Leistung meint."[24] Zu diesem Thema zitiert die Herausgeberin von „Alcide, der kleine Mönch" A. Schleinzer mit der Überschrift „Am Tag bewundernswerter Askese" auf den Punkt gebracht: „Wenn du ein Übermensch sein willst, kannst du nach wie vor ein Christ sein, aber ein Heiliger wirst du nie."[25] Sie führt über diese Tugend als pädagogische Hilfe weiter aus: „Wenn du klein werden willst, verachte nicht die Größe anderer."[26] Über die Gewissensbisse von Alcide sagt sie: „Wenn du deine Tugend nicht bewundern kannst, bewundere nicht deine reumütige Gesinnung."[27]

Mit Fingerspitzengefühl durchschaut Madeleine Delbrêl Gefahren des christlichen Lebens, die sie treffend anspricht. Der Spiegel, der dabei entsteht, und in dem man sich humorvoll betrachten kann, hilft einem, sich durch einen bewußten Umgang und durch wiederholte Übung von solchen Verhaltensweisen wenigstens teilweise zu verabschieden.

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[23] Siehe Stephanie Wollmann, "Barmherzigkeit im Verständnis Madeleine Delbrêls," *Pastoralblatt*, no. 12 (2015): 361–66.
[24] Madeleine Delbrêl, *Der kleine Mönch im Alltag, für uns neu entdeckt von Anselm Grün* (Freiburg Br.: Herder Verlag, 2005), 49.
[25] Madeleine Delbrêl, *Alcide, der kleine Mönch: Gedankenblitze eines Gottsuchers*, ed. Annette Schleinzer (Munich, Zurich, and Vienna: Verlag Neue Stadt, 2020), 84.
[26] Delbrêl, *Alcide, der kleine Mönch,* 81.
[27] Delbrêl, *Alcide, der kleine Mönch,* 83.

Fazit

Madeleine Delbrêl ist überzeugt, dass der Mensch von heute im christlichen Glauben andere Wege gehen muss: „Manche setzen sich in den Kopf, es genau so wie früher machen zu wollen. Das führt dazu, überhaupt nichts zu tun, weil so etwas für uns praktisch unmöglich ist.“[28] Einerseits ist sie also in der Tradition verankert, andererseits eine „moderne“ Heilige, die am Puls der Zeit die Nöte erkannte und so zu einer Wegbereiterin der Konzils wurde. Das wertvollste an ihrer Laien-Spiritualität ist die Alltagsmystik: sie konnte tiefe Innerlichkeit mit dem praktischen christlichen Leben verbinden. Ihre Überzeugungen, Reflexionen und ihr gelebter Glaube zeugen von einer lebbaren, praktikablen Spiritualität in der Welt von heute ohne Abgeschiedenheit. Sie suchte eine Sprache, die alle verstehen können und fand eine Ausdrucksweise, die originelle Bilder verwendet, die sich ganz aus dem Alltag inspirieren und oft von Humor geprägt sind.

Ihre Sehnsucht, das Evangelium zu teilen, führte sie an die Periphärie von Paris, sie blieb nicht in ihrem eigenen Glück mit Christus, den sie entdeckt hatte. Ihr missionarischer Geist, Eifer und Tatendrang kann das Pfarrleben von heute inspirieren, um mehr in die Welt hinauszugehen und die Menschen zu suchen. Das von ihr gezeichnete Bild des Laien in der Kirche ist durch die Botschaft dieser modernen Heiligen ein eschatologisches Zeichen für die Leiden der Welt, die sie durch eine tiefe „Theologie der Beziehung“ zu heilen versuchte.

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[28] Delbrêl, *Gebet in einem weltlichen Leben,* 81–82.

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IS REST POSSIBLE IN THEOLOGY?

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Abstract

This chapter asks whether rest can be understood not only as a human need but also as a properly theological category in the context of contemporary performance-driven culture. Starting from Jan Löffeld's diagnosis of religious indifference and the modern difficulty of relating to God, the author situates spiritual (mystical) theology as a discipline that reads the movements of the Spirit in human life, including the tension between permanent self-improvement and the desire for deep inner peace. Biblical creation narratives (Gen 1–2) are interpreted so that the seventh day, sanctified by God's rest, becomes the first day of human existence and communion with God, revealing rest as the culmination and perfection of creation rather than its negation. Drawing on the history of salvation, this chapter then shows how sleep, rest, and leisure function as privileged places of theophany (Mary's "falling asleep," Joseph's dreams, Elijah's sleep under the broom tree, Jonah's three days in the belly of the fish, Christ's three days in the realm of death), and explores the paradoxical unity of work and rest in God's action and in Christ's redemptive "passivity." In dialogue with current debates on automation, productivity, and work-life balance, the author argues that human dignity cannot be reduced to work performance and that the active and contemplative dimensions of life (Mary and Martha) must be integrated rather than opposed. The conclusion proposes rest—as Sunday celebration lived inwardly, as dwelling with God in the heart—as a locus theologicus and eschatological sign, suggesting that the theology of rest and its relation to work will become an increasingly important theme not only in spiritual theology, but also in social ethics and the theology of the Eucharistic form of the Church in the 21st century.

Keywords: Rest; spiritual theology; work; contemplation; *locus theologicus*; work-life balance.

Jan Löffeld, in his book *When Nobody Misses God*,[1] states that the declining number of Church members in the Western world is caused by religious indifference; people simply no longer have a reason to ask or search for God, or for what He says or can offer them. Modern humanity finds itself in a situation similar to Saint Peter in Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel *Quo Vadis*, where he asks Jesus, walking toward the Eternal City, where He is going, with the difference that today, humankind does not even recognize Jesus beside them, let alone strike up a conversation or want to relate to Him in any way. Naturally, we then ask whether theology still has anything to offer humanity.

Spiritual theology, sometimes referred to as mystical theology, seeks to understand humanity in the wholeness of life.[2] Within and to humanity, God speaks in His own specific ways, offering Himself on the journey of life so that humankind might recognize Him, discover Him as the Lord of their lives and the Giver of all good things. The human person allows God to pray within themselves and to transform everything that they are and have for the greater glory of God, thereby achieving salvation. Spiritual theology tries to recognize the movements of the Spirit within us. And just as the Spirit leads the individual, He also leads all of humanity, the mystical Body of Christ.

In this work, I attempt to explore a theme as vital and current for contemporary humanity as the concept of *work-life balance*. How is it possible to reconcile, on one hand, the often-demanded need to constantly improve, increase quality and quantity, and to grow and develop always and in everything, with the simultaneously present human desire for deep rest and inner peace, unburdened by the demands of a pulsating work or family life that only wants results?

"By the seventh day God had finished the work that he had been doing; so the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done." (Gen 2:2–3). I would say: God rested. And we can rest with God.

When we look at the structure of the biblical text on creation, we see how it builds up and intensifies—until it reaches the pinnacle of creation: humankind, and rest. On the sixth day, man was created, and on the seventh day, God rested, thereby finishing—perfecting—the work of creation.[3] The first day that man enters the work of creation is the seventh, the last. Humanity enters the seventh day

[1] Jan Löffeld, *Když Bůh nikomu nechybí: úvahy o náboženské lhostejnosti*, trans. Zdeněk Jančařík (Prague: Portál, 2025). Originally published as *Wenn nichts fehlt, wo Gott fehlt: Das Christentum vor der religiösen Indifferenz*, EThSt ed. (Würzburg: Echter, 2020).

[2] Michal Altrichter, *Spirituální teologie*, Prameny spirituality (Olomouc: Nakladatelství Centra Aletti Refugium Velehrad–Roma, 2017), 30.

[3] We can consider the relationship between the word "complete," the Latin verb "*perficit*" used in the Vulgate, and the original Hebrew word כלה, which implies another word, namely "perfect" in the sense of complete. We can thus consider that to complete something means to bring a given thing to its goal, to make it perfect, finished. Genesis places this completeness, finality, also in the sense of perfection ("it was very good," Gen 1:31) on the seventh day.

as the pinnacle of creation, a day that God set apart from the other six to sanctify it. For the order of creation, it is the last day; for humanity, it is the first day—Sunday. And just as He sanctifies the seventh day, He also sanctifies humankind within it. Humans are created to be with God, to be holy just as the One who called them "from non-existence into being" is Holy.

When the first couple sin, they suddenly become afraid to be with God: they fear God will see them naked. Since humankind left Paradise, they have yearned for Paradise, for their heavenly home. They have the image of Paradise imprinted on their hearts, an inexpressible deep joy; they carry a nostalgia for Paradise and search for what was lost until they find it.

In the history of salvation, we find more places revealing that rest, sleep, or leisure is a place of theophany. First of all, it is the Mother of God, the Co-redemptrix,[4] of whom the Church says she did not die but "fell asleep."[5] It is her husband, Joseph, to whom the most important instructions regarding salvation history were presented during sleep (Mt 1:20; Mt 2:13). It is Elijah, who falls asleep by a broom tree; an angel appears to him, and in the strength of angelic food, he recognizes the Lord in the "noise of silence" (1 Kgs 19:4–12). It is Jonah, who flees from God and, in the midst of a storm, goes to sleep on a cushion at the stern of the ship (Jon 1:5). He then "falls asleep" for three days in the belly of a great fish, in the depths of the sea (Jon 2:1), a prefiguration of Christ's death and baptism. The catechumen is immersed three times in water as a sign of the three days Jesus spent in the heart of the earth and as a sign of the three Persons of God. "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death," writes Saint Paul (Rom 6:4).

A paradox is also hidden in the days when Jesus is dead. We might say that He died: He does nothing, His body lies still. Yet we profess that precisely in those three days He descended into hell, shattered the bronze gates, broke the iron bars in two, led Adam and all who were waiting out of the dominion of death, and gave everyone new life. When Jesus is seemingly dead—is He working or resting? In the Gospel of John we read: "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working" (John 5:17). Does this mean that we, like Jesus, should work constantly and avoid rest? In redeemed reality, the distinction between work and rest breaks down. With God, work is not exhausting in a way that requires "gathering strength," "recreation," or "re-creating" oneself. Likewise, rest does not mean doing nothing, idleness, or boredom. God completes the week of creation by resting—thus, resting itself becomes creation, an activity.

[4] I do not wish to engage here in a significant discussion of this theological term, which was renewed by the decree of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mater populi fidelis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2025), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20251104_mater-populi-fidelis_en.html.

[5] It is a tradition mainly from the East, developed in particular by John of Damascus and Andrew of Crete, who in their homilies speak mainly of the "falling asleep" rather than the "death" of the Mother of God.

Jesus, when He sleeps tiredly on the boat in the middle of the storm, does not cease his redemptive work, for which He came. Our human concept of work and rest is dichotomous—either/or. In God's action, however, two dichotomies appear as two poles of a single reality. Action and contemplation, day and night, work and rest do not stand against each other as rivals. Both are present in our lives without confusion, without division, and without separation, just as divinity and humanity are united in the one person of Christ. Thus, only a person can connect what is seemingly incompatible.

When we look at the world in which we live today, we describe it as an age of performance and control—both external and self-control—in which the ethos of diligence and productivity prevails. We have performance tables for everything; we are expected to meet criteria, fill out career-growth plans, and each year be more successful than the previous one, and if we aren't, we need to explain why and how we will catch up and surpass them next year. Our phones contain apps that monitor and measure everything that can be monitored and measured, loudly informing us that we have not completed a language lesson, climbed enough flights of stairs, or that our sleep needs improvement.

This reporting, self-monitoring, and performance measurement penetrates even absurd contexts. For instance, social care services must demonstrate through satisfaction questionnaires that they are necessary, and, as a result, they are entitled to increased subsidies, for example, so they can better pay their underpaid employees. Academia demands endless documentation, meetings, excellent CVs, top-rated publications, and attendance at conferences, even during summer holidays, to be at least somewhat relevant to our employers. Thanks to modern technologies, we can accomplish more work in the same amount of time. And this leads us to assume that because we can do more work, we should do more. Thanks to communication tools, work communication often becomes permanent; people are constantly available, and in certain teams, people may even be penalized for not responding to late-evening work-related WhatsApp messages, or it is assumed that they will do at least some work even while on vacation.[6]

Despite this, there are life situations when it seems that this view of the human person, whom we define by what work he/she does and how much he/she can handle (and the more, the better), suddenly shifts. There are situations in which we do not view a person in terms of their work performance: these are pregnant women and parents with small children, elderly people, the infirm, people who are chronically ill and dependent on the long-term care of others, but also unborn children and mentally disabled people who can never work and never will. There are certainly other groups—people we protect, care for, and recognize as valuable and dignified, even without defining them by their work and performance.

[6] See Jan Géryk, *Společnost úzkosti* (Brno: Host, 2023), 104–154.

If this is true in these situations, I believe it is also true outside them. A person is valuable and important simply because he or she exists, because God loves each person overwhelmingly and wants to be with them.

Given the increasing automation of work, we must ask ourselves a question. Let us assume a degree of automation of human work such that many people will not have to perform it at all, or at least not to the same extent as before. What will a person do with "free" time when they no longer need to work?

For centuries, physical labour secured human livelihood: "By the sweat of our brow we ate our bread." After a long evolution, we handed over physical labour to machines: combine harvesters, cranes, tractors, robotic arms, and nuclear power plants, which, like Prometheus, ignite an unquenchable fire that powers all the electronic devices we use. In the last 250 years, we have begun to work mentally. Most of our work is "vibrations of the air," just words. Lawyers, psychologists, teachers, marketing specialists, politicians, bankers, investment advisors, theologians—fill in the blank—they all make a living with words. Words have power, and words create reality. Which is encouraging for us, disciples of the Word, I think. Now, in recent years, machines have learned to think too. What will we have left when we hand over to machines everything that can be handed over to machines, and they do it more accurately, without errors and without effort, just as a calculator calculates accurately, without errors and without effort? No human being is stronger than an excavator.[7] What will remain in "spiritual work" for humans when we disregard physical and mental work?

I believe we must descend deeper. The active and contemplative lives seem opposed, yet we need both. Mary and Martha's behaviours are not contradictory; we need both. In every person, these two dimensions unite: service and listening, action and contemplation. And in every person to varying degrees, just as God created each of us uniquely. And we need this diversity too. This year, Pope Leo XIV remarked in a homily on Mary and Martha:

> Although it is true that we must live out our faith through concrete actions, faithfully carrying out our duties according to our state of life and vocation, it is essential that we do so only after meditating on the Word of God and listening to what the Holy Spirit is saying to our hearts. To this end, we should set aside moments of silence, moments of prayer, times in which, quieting noise and distractions, we recollect ourselves before God in simplicity of heart…[8]

[7] See the reflections of Czech economist and philosopher Tomáš Sedláček.

[8] Leo XIV, "Homily at Holy Mass in the Cathedral of Albano, 20 July 2025" (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2025), https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/homilies/2025/documents/20250720-omelia-albano.html.

At the beginning, I asked whether rest is possible in theology. I believe it is not only possible but necessary. I think that rest is a theological category, a *locus theologicus*, which we will consider with increasing relevance and necessity in this century. The question of rest is about celebrating Sunday, the eighth day. I do not mean only liturgical and social celebration, but also inner, personal celebration. Is Sunday for me, or am I for Sunday? Am I able to regularly descend into the depths of my heart and talk and be with my Friend who is waiting for me there and longs to be with me? Do I understand my spiritual, intimate life with God also in terms of performance, how much I have accomplished and done?

As academic theologians, we must also ask ourselves whether our God is no longer just the subject of our theological reflections and articles. The question of Sunday, of rest, is a question of the vocation of all humanity, of the one Body of Christ. In Heavenly Jerusalem, where we are all journeying, we will meet at the Lamb's wedding feast, where Jesus Himself will walk among us and serve us. At the wedding feast, Jesus performed his first miracle, revealing His divine power. And because He is the Alpha and the Omega, the last miracle He performed was also at a wedding: the Lamb's wedding feast, in which He gave himself to his disciples, and we remember it to this day. Humankind ate the bread of the strong, and angels marvel that a man is the judge of the world and the Lord of the universe.

I believe we can say that rest is a *locus theologicus*, a place of theophany. At the same time, the importance of rest in human life also corresponds to the eschatological fulfilment in the theology of creation and in the theology of the Eucharistic form of the Church. In my opinion, the relationship between work and rest will be an important topic not only in politics and economics, but also a significant social issue and a spiritual concern for people of our century.

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PART VI. WAR, PEACE, ECOLOGY, AND GLOBAL CRISIS

AUGUSTINE, AQUINAS, AND THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

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Abstract

This chapter examines the just war theories of Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas to evaluate the Russo-Ukrainian War, particularly the moral legitimacy of Russia's invasion and Ukraine's defence. While both thinkers emphasize core criteria, their approaches differ in emphasis, yet remain firmly rooted in Christian theology. The analysis extends to later developments in the just war tradition and assesses its applicability to contemporary realities absent in the medieval context: nuclear arsenals, drone warfare, and NATO's collective defence role, including associated escalation risks. Although some scholars contend that nuclear weapons' disproportionate and indiscriminate effects render traditional just war theory obsolete, others maintain its continued relevance for scrutinizing drone operations and alliance-based interventions, underscoring the framework's adaptability to modern ethical dilemmas.

Keywords: Augustine of Hippo; Thomas Aquinas; just war theory; Russo-Ukrainian War; nuclear weapons; drone warfare.

War and Theology

There are clear similarities between the Chechen Wars (1994–2009) and the Russia-Ukraine War. Both conflicts involve former Soviet republics resisting Russian military intervention aimed at suppressing aspirations for political autonomy and national self-determination. In Chechnya, Russia sought to crush a separatist movement that declared independence after the USSR's collapse. In Ukraine, Russia also faces an ideological movement that seeks to distance itself from Russian influence. Additional similarities include Russia's use of overwhelming force, including heavy artillery and bombardment of urban centres, the portrayal of resistance fighters as "terrorists" or "Nazis" to delegitimize them, and the civilian toll accompanied by allegations of war crimes on both sides.

However, a key contextual difference stands out: the role of religion. The Chechen conflict was deeply infused with Islamic identity and, especially in its second phase, radical jihadist elements, which framed the struggle as a defence of

Muslim lands against Russian "infidel" occupation. By contrast, Ukraine is predominantly a Christian country, with Christianity (primarily Eastern Orthodoxy) being the dominant religion among its population. This religious dimension in Chechnya allowed Russia to align its campaign with the global "war on terror" after the September 11, 2001, attacks. Western governments muted their criticism of atrocities in Chechnya in exchange for Moscow's cooperation in counterterrorism efforts. This pragmatic silence contrasted sharply with the Western response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Theological foundations have historically played a significant, and sometimes hidden, role in shaping the justifications, narratives, and motivations behind many wars. This holds even in conflicts that appear predominantly secular or geopolitical, such as the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War, which is frequently analysed through the lenses of territory, security, nationalism, and post-Soviet identity.

In the Russo-Ukrainian War, we continue to observe the intertwining of war and religious ethics, despite the two countries sharing nearly identical religious traditions. In 2024, the Russian Orthodox Church released a statement framing Russia's war against Ukraine—and against Western countries—as a holy endeavour, positioning Russia as protecting the world "against the Antichrist."[1] While Pope Leo XIV, along with a representative of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, for their part, condemned the war between Russia and Ukraine as a "sacrilegious war," because of the profound religious schism caused by the war in the Orthodox Church.[2] The Russian Orthodox Church, the largest and most influential branch of Orthodoxy, is pitted against the influential Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

War raises questions that far exceed the boundaries of scientific rationality. While philosophy can and does incorporate historical, political, and sociological insights into its analysis of armed conflict, these inquiries repeatedly extend beyond natural philosophy toward a deeper metaphysics, one closely intertwined with theology, given the ultimate motivations and foundations that often underlie wars. Consequently, throughout history, numerous thinkers across diverse disciplines have studied and written extensively about the justice (or injustice) of war.

Questions about the justice of war abound in Homer and in the Scriptures. The greatest architects of Western philosophical tradition—Thucydides, Socrates, Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero—not only reflected deeply on the justice (or injustice) of war but frequently engaged in it directly as soldiers or commanders.

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[1] Russian Orthodox Church, "Order of the XXV Russian World People's Council 'The Present and Future of the Russian World,'" March 27, 2024, http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6116189.html (accessed February 6, 2025).

[2] Raymond J. Souza, "Russia's 'Sacrilegious War' Shatters Orthodox Unity, Prompts Response from Pope Leo," *National Catholic Register*, July 7, 2025, https://www.ncregister.com/commentaries/russia-s-sacrilegious-war (accessed February 6, 2025).

When examining the moral dimensions of war through the lens of justice, several ancient thinkers laid important groundwork. Plato and Aristotle, for instance, reflected on the conditions under which war could be legitimate or conducted ethically—such as treating it as a last resort or limiting its brutality—ideas that later influenced just war thinking. However, the systematic framework we recognize today as just war theory—with its emphasis on moral criteria for both initiating war (*jus ad bellum*) and conducting it (*jus in bello*)—is most directly rooted in Christian theology, which began with Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD).

This chapter explores the ideas of Augustine and Aquinas, two pivotal theologians and philosophers whose work underpins just war theory. Although their ethical approaches to war are firmly grounded in Christian theology, their principles remain relevant today, and not only for Christians. The analysis applies these concepts to the current Russia-Ukraine conflict, highlighting challenges posed by drone warfare and the ever-present risk of nuclear escalation.

Russia, Ukraine, and the West in the War

The histories of Ukraine and Russia are profoundly intertwined. They share centuries of common origins, cultural ties, and political union. Both nations trace their roots to Kyivan Rus', the medieval East Slavic state centred in Kyiv (9th–13th centuries). Much of modern Ukraine was gradually incorporated into the Russian Empire from the mid-17th century onward, following the Pereyaslav Agreement of 1654, and remained under imperial rule until the 1917 revolutions. Following a brief period of attempts at independence, Ukraine was a constituent republic of the Soviet Union from 1922 until the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991. This long period of shared governance included tragic chapters, like the Holodomor, a devastating man-made famine in Soviet Ukraine from 1932 to 1933.

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War underscores the deep historical and personal interconnections between the two nations.

Regarding economic relations, Russia was Ukraine's largest single-country trading partner before the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Russia mattered far more to Ukraine's trade profile than Ukraine did to Russia's, which diversified its energy exports to Europe. The relationship collapsed with the full-scale invasion in 2022. Today, Ukraine's main trading partners are Poland, China, Germany, and Turkey. This reorientation could prove to last in the post-war period, depending on political and economic alignments.

Even among the military, one can see the proximity between the two countries. General Mykhailo Zabrodskyi, a former commander of the Ukrainian Air Assault Forces, for example, graduated from a military academy in St. Petersburg. He even served five years in the Russian Armed Forces under contract before trans-

ferring to the Ukrainian military. Similarly, General Oleksandr Syrskyi, commander of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, was born in Russia and graduated from the Moscow Higher Military Command School. He served in the Soviet Ground Forces until the USSR's dissolution in 1991.

Despite the extensive religious, cultural, territorial, and even military proximity between Ukraine and Russia, Ukraine exhibits significantly greater historical and ethnic diversity. This is due to its western regions, which underwent prolonged incorporation into Western and Central European polities. Russian influence is particularly strong along the Black Sea coast and in the Donets Basin. However, Ukraine's borders have shifted over time, resulting in a multiplicity of cultural influences, including those from Poland, Austria, and Hungary.

In any case, the Russia-Ukraine war resists explanation through the traditional lens of ethnic or civilizational clash. The conflict appears to be more strongly fuelled by differences in political ideology.

To effectively address the issue, it is essential to recognize the war's well-documented origins. Before the outbreak of open war between Russia and Ukraine, a tumultuous history existed between the two countries. This included political and military interference from both internal and external sources, as well as mutual distrust between Russia and Ukraine, and between Russia and Western nations.

The expansion of NATO into Eastern European countries is a significant concern for Russia. Russia views NATO's eastward expansion as a major threat, a concern dating back to the Cold War, particularly since Turkey joined in 1952 and West Germany in 1955. Former Warsaw Pact nations such as Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, and Romania also joined NATO before 2008, when the Allies declared that Ukraine would eventually become a member. Ukraine applied for membership in September 2022 but has not received an invitation due to divisions among NATO states. As of January 2026, there is no consensus on membership, though Ukraine's path remains open in principle.

The Euromaidan protests that began at the end of 2013 clearly exposed the ideological and cultural divisions in Ukraine. Many trace the war's roots to these protests, which exposed Ukraine's east-west divide: the western portion of the country seeks to move closer to the European political model. In contrast, the eastern and southern portions exhibit strong Russian influence. The unrest ousted President Viktor Yanukovych, who favoured Russia over European integration.

Russia's invasion of Crimea followed the Euromaidan crisis. Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 marked the first use of military force for territorial expansion in Europe since World War II. Crimea has historical ties to Russia. It was transferred to Ukraine in 1954 to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the

Treaty of Pereyaslav.[3] The region is home to the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol and has a predominantly Russian-speaking population.

Western powers condemned the annexation of Crimea and imposed sanctions but avoided military intervention, arguably due to fears of escalation with nuclear-armed Russia, Ukraine's non-NATO status, and Crimea's historical Russian ties. In any case, this perceived inaction encouraged the 2022 invasion.

The annexation of Crimea also empowered Russian separatists in the Donbas region. In April 2014, these separatists, backed by Russia, started clashing with Ukrainian forces in a bid to establish the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). The Minsk Agreements (Minsk I in September 2014, Minsk II in February 2015), mediated by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and involving Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany, aimed to establish ceasefires with the separatists but were repeatedly violated and ultimately failed. In 2022, Russia recognized the DPR and LPR as independent just before invading.

In February 2022, Russian forces launched a full-scale invasion without a formal declaration of war. Ukraine repelled initial advances, thereby prolonging the war. The invasion drew widespread global condemnation. In response, NATO and its Western allies imposed unprecedented sanctions on Russia and began financial and military cooperation with Ukraine.

Ceasefire efforts began days after the invasion but have repeatedly failed. Notably, a potential deal in April 2022 was reportedly vetoed by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Still, the Bucha Massacre by Russian troops in March of that year also made reaching an agreement more difficult. In 2025, under President Trump, negotiations advanced significantly, focusing on territorial issues, security guarantees, and non-NATO commitments, though difficult disputes persisted as of February 2026, four years after the invasion. For instance, Ukraine rejects the cession of territories, and Russia rejects the presence of Western troops on Ukrainian soil after the war.

After four years of full-scale war, it is reported that Russia controls approximately 20% of Ukraine's internationally recognized territory, including Crimea and parts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson oblasts seized since the 2022 invasion. Critics of territorial concessions argue that concessions to Russia would only produce a temporary pause in the fighting, as the Russian regime would likely resume the war soon to secure further gains and exert greater political dominance over Ukraine. There are tens of thousands of military personnel and civilians killed on both sides. Ukraine has disproportionately borne civilian deaths and suffering due to widespread Russian strikes on populated areas and infrastructure. Economically, both nations face severe strain.

[3] Treaty of 1654, in which the Ukrainian Cossack Hetmanate placed itself under Russian protection. The shared Orthodox faith was a key factor in the treaty. The treaty sparked the Russo-Polish War (1654–1667).

The Russo-Ukrainian War presents a serious threat regarding the potential use of nuclear weapons by Russia. In 1996, Ukraine transferred all its nuclear warheads to Russia for dismantling. With over 5,000 nuclear warheads, Russia possesses the world's largest arsenal. This Russian attribute influences all calculations of diplomacy and military engagement.

In addition to the nuclear threat, the Russo-Ukrainian War represents the first major conflict dominated by drones (unmanned aerial vehicles, or UAVs), which are remotely or autonomously controlled platforms operating on land, at sea, or in the air. The conflict has dramatically accelerated drone innovation. Major producers include the US, China, Turkey, Israel, Poland, and Iran, supplemented by domestic efforts from both warring sides. UAVs range widely in cost, capability, range, and durability—some cheap models (as low as $400) can destroy tanks, rendering traditional armour vulnerable. This has also spurred rapid advances in anti-drone technologies to evade UAV strikes.

Ethically, remote killing raises profound concerns. Drones eliminate personal risk, stripping warfare of honour, bravery, guilt, and remorse. Their low cost and ease of use may lower barriers to conflict, making war seem cheaper and safer, thereby potentially undermining just war principles such as that of the "last resort."

This war also marks the beginning of the use of artificial intelligence in combat, particularly for gathering information from multiple sources, including satellites, to inform tactical decisions. Artificial intelligence is available to both sides of the conflict.

Augustine, Aquinas, and the Russo-Ukrainian War

Despite their shared Christian theological foundations, Augustine places greater emphasis on the justice of war and on the sins it can exacerbate. He even argued that prioritizing innocent lives over justice is a form of cowardice. Aquinas, by contrast, emphasizes the common good and offers a detailed philosophical framework that addresses law, sedition, revenge, and the secondary role of the choice of weapons. He also highlights discrimination in warfare—the need to protect non-combatants.

Many focus on Augustine's *Confessions* and *City of God* as sources of his views on war, but these are not the primary sources. Key texts include *Contra Faustum*, letters to Marcellinus and Boniface, and *De libero arbitrio*, which argues that not all killing is sinful and explores core ethical themes.

Augustine's just war criteria include legitimate authority to declare war, a just cause to correct injustice, and a right intention aimed at peace. He also stresses mercy and proportionality and views war's true evil as rooted in human sin, the pursuit of power and evil, rather than mere destruction or innocent deaths.

Nearly eight centuries later, Thomas Aquinas built on Augustine (whom he cites frequently) while moving beyond him, drawing on Aristotelian influences.

Aquinas, however, emphasized human nature and virtues, and defended the political community for the common good. He also addressed ongoing issues, such as Christian-Muslim conflicts.

Aquinas treats war mainly in the *Summa theologiae* (ST) II-II, q. 40, on war, within the Treatise on Charity, not justice or prudence as one might expect. This placement indicates that he examines whether war sins against charity (e.g., hatred or greed). Other relevant sections include: ST II-II, q. 64 on lawful killing and the doctrine of double effect (DDE); ST I-II, qq. 90–97 on law; ST II-II, q. 108 on revenge; ST II-II, q. 42 on sedition; ST II-II, q. 29 on peace; ST II-II, q. 2, a. 5 on "just war" linked to common-good defence, and weapon choice as morally accidental.

Very few scholars address all these questions. Most use only one or two. Some even disregard q. 40 and focus on, for instance, q. 64, as in the case of the Catholic philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe or the philosopher Thomas Nagel.

In ST II-II, q. 40, Aquinas cites Augustine (*Contra Faustum*) and Scripture, listing three core criteria: legitimate authority, just cause, and right intention. Additional criteria appear elsewhere, such as the last resort in ST I-II, q. 105, a. 3, on relations with foreigners; discrimination/non-combatant protection in ST II-II, q. 64; and proportionality in ST II-II, q. 42, on sedition and tyranny.

In ST II-II, q. 64, a. 7, Aquinas articulates the doctrine of double effect, which holds that an act has two effects—one intended (good) and one foreseen but unintended (harmful). The act can be permissible if the act itself is not intrinsically evil, if the good effect is intended, not the bad one, if the bad effect is not a means to the good, if the harmful effect follows immediately from the act (causally, not temporally), and if there is a proportionate reason that justifies the harm.

The doctrine of double effect is especially relevant in *jus in bello*—the ethical conduct of war. Military actions often risk unintentionally harming or killing non-combatants. Weapons such as atomic bombs or biological agents greatly increase the danger to innocent lives. This highlights the need for rigorous ethical scrutiny in wartime decisions to minimize civilian casualties.

Despite their differences, Augustine and Aquinas agree that war should pursue justice and peace and share criteria for a just war, including authority, just cause, right intention, proportionality, and last resort.

The Russo-Ukrainian War shares some traits with civil conflicts, including religious elements, yet one core reality persists: Russia has invaded a sovereign neighbour. Ukraine endured invasions in 2014 and again in 2022. Under just war theory (*jus ad bellum*), Ukraine holds a clear just cause: self-defence against aggression, and demonstrates right intention in repelling the invader and reclaiming territory.

Ukraine's resort to war qualifies as a last resort following failed diplomacy and prior aggression. Russia, conversely, invokes preventive war to counter perceived threats from NATO expansion, Ukraine's Western alignment, and risks to its Black Sea access via Crimea. Russian narratives highlight Ukraine's ideological

shift toward Europe as endangering its Sevastopol naval base. A NATO-aligned Ukraine dominating Crimea could turn the Black Sea into a "NATO-Turkish lake," limiting Russian power projection.

Unlike Chechnya's mountainous region, Ukraine's flat terrain—lacking natural barriers such as mountains or major rivers—and its proximity to Moscow (roughly 480 km) heighten vulnerability. Russia fears that Ukraine could become a launchpad for threats against the Volgograd Gap, the strategic corridor between the Black and Caspian Seas (near former Stalingrad), which is vital for access to oil in the Caucasus and for southern Russia's security. Historical memory of the Battle of Stalingrad (1942–43), where the Nazis targeted this area to sever Soviet supply lines, amplifies these concerns. Russia's open geography has long shaped its military thinking.

Despite criticisms of their political systems, one can still argue that Ukraine and Russia meet the criterion of authority.

On proportionality, the non-nuclear Ukraine employs conventional forces, drones, and targeted tactics in self-defence. Russia's invasions and support for separatists appear disproportionate, as diplomatic avenues could have addressed NATO or political concerns. Nuclear threats from Russia complicate matters. Aquinas viewed weapon choice as "accidental," but nuclear weapons' catastrophic scale demands re-evaluation, as their use could cause unjustifiable harm far exceeding benefits.

Modern just war theory adds the criterion of serious prospects of success (or a reasonable chance of victory), which was not drawn from the writings of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

Russia dwarfs Ukraine across key metrics. It has more than 28 times the area, a GDP more than 10 times higher (in USD), a population more than four times greater, and the world's largest nuclear arsenal. Ukraine's chances of a standalone victory are extremely low, particularly given the risk of nuclear escalation.

Some argue that this criterion is relaxed in defensive wars, where states have a moral duty to resist aggression regardless of the odds. But proportionality still applies—avoiding greater harm than is warranted. Full-scale unrestricted war risks Ukraine's devastation given Russia's superiority.

Western NATO support (arms, funding) bolsters Ukraine without direct combat, calibrated to avoid provoking a nuclear response. Augustine and Aquinas would likely argue that NATO countries are effectively at war with Russia, as they align themselves with Ukraine's pursuit of victory and actively support the conflict with weapons and funding.

Aquinas's doctrine of double effect in ST II-II, q. 64, provides a critical lens for assessing military and political actions during this war. In a world where supplying weapons might bring us closer to nuclear conflict, every decision should consider the ethical principles outlined in this doctrine. This doctrine is relevant not only to the nations directly engaged in battle but also to Ukraine's Western

allies and other arms suppliers, such as China and Turkey, which play a less direct role.

In the nuclear age, generalized nuclear war yields no winners, rendering it unjustifiable. Ukraine's defensive war aligns more closely with just war principles than Russia's aggression, though the nuclear shadow and prospects of success raise ethical dilemmas for the continuation of hostilities and for external aid.

Conclusion

Augustine and Thomas Aquinas developed timeless ethical principles for evaluating the justice of war and conduct in war. These criteria remain applicable across historical periods, cultures, and religious contexts, including the Russo-Ukrainian War, where drones and nuclear risks define modern warfare. Their framework continues to provide essential moral guidance.

While cultural distinctions exist—especially in western Ukraine, with its separate identity—Russia and Ukraine share centuries of intertwined history, including political unions, administrative land transfers, conflicts, and humanitarian crises.

Under Augustine and Aquinas's just war criteria, Ukraine has far stronger grounds for claiming a just war. It fights a defensive struggle that satisfies key requirements: just cause, right intention, legitimate authority, and last resort. Proportionality is controversial, however.

Russia's justification rests primarily on preventive war—countering perceived threats from NATO expansion, Ukraine's Western alignment, and strategic vulnerabilities. Preventive war lacks firm support in classical just war theory, which prioritizes actual aggression over anticipated future risks, making Russia's case significantly weaker.

Nuclear weapons elevate proportionality to paramount importance. This principle demands that anticipated benefits outweigh harms, including unintended global consequences. Aquinas viewed weapon choice as secondary ("accidental"), but nuclear arsenals demand re-evaluation: escalation could produce catastrophic, unjustifiable damage far exceeding any legitimate aim.

The modern criterion of reasonable chance of success, absent in Augustine and Aquinas, is not strictly required for a war's justice—especially in defensive conflicts, where resistance to aggression carries moral weight regardless of odds. But it can be argued that proportionality already implicitly incorporates considerations of success.

Nuclear risks extend beyond the belligerents, implicating NATO allies and the international community. Then Aquinas's doctrine of double effect becomes crucial. An action (e.g., supplying arms to Ukraine) may produce a beneficial intended effect (e.g., defending sovereignty) alongside a foreseen but unintended adverse effect, like heightening nuclear risk.

In the nuclear age, every party, direct combatants and indirect supporters alike, bears an unavoidable ethical duty to continually reassess intentions and consequences. While this scrutiny may limit decisive action, atomic weapons make such caution an imperative moral responsibility.

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THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON ECO-ANXIETY

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Abstract

In a world marked by escalating environmental degradation and uncertainty, eco-anxiety is increasingly affecting individuals through feelings of worry and fear about the future of the planet. This chapter explores the nature and causes of eco-anxiety, and considers how eco-theology can respond to this growing phenomenon. Drawing on the work of Celia Deane-Drummond, eco-anxiety is understood as a form of anxiety arising from concerns about environmental destruction, economic strain, materialism and consumerism that threaten the future of the planet. Deane-Drummond emphasises justice, wisdom and stewardship, proposing a spiritual response rooted in the Doctrine of Creation. She argues that contemplation can foster peace, joy and a renewed sense of connection with God, others and the natural world. Recognising God in the simplicity of daily life encourages happiness, wonder and belonging, initiating the process of overcoming estrangement and isolation caused by eco-anxiety. The discussion is further enriched by the work of Panu Pihkala, who highlights the emotional, psychological and existential impact of eco-anxiety. By bringing theological reflection into conversation with environmental concerns, this chapter examines how eco-theology can offer hope, resilience and a stronger commitment to caring for creation.

Keywords: Eco-anxiety; eco-theology; climate change; contemplation; hope; ecological stewardship; Celia Deane-Drummond.

Introduction

In an age marked by ecological degradation and growing uncertainty, eco-anxiety has become part of the human experience. This chapter explores the nature of eco-anxiety, tracing the concrete causes and examining how theology can offer a meaningful response. Drawing on the work of eco-theologian Celia Deane-Drummond, it defines eco-anxiety as a form of anxiety that emphasises catastrophic economic strain, materialism and consumerism, threatening the very future of the earth as an ecosystem. This discussion is further enriched by the work of Panu Pihkala, whose research emphasises the emotional and existential dimensions of

eco-anxiety. To begin, it is helpful to establish a clear understanding of eco-anxiety.

Eco-anxiety

Deane-Drummond emphasises the connection between ecology and theology, suggesting that when theological reflection incorporates ecological concerns, it heightens awareness of environmental realities and encourages sustainability. However, it is important to acknowledge that by promoting environmental sustainability, individuals may experience eco-anxiety when faced with the realities of climate change.

Eco-anxiety refers to the persistent worry and emotional distress caused by increasing awareness of environmental degradation, biodiversity loss and climate change. Panu Pihkala defines it as "various difficult and mental states arising from environmental conditions and knowledge about them,"[1] capturing its wide-ranging and emotional impact. Eco-anxiety affects both individuals and communities, sometimes leading to feelings of paralysis, hopelessness and in extreme cases, violence. It can contribute to depression and diminished wellbeing, making it one of the most significant yet overlooked psychological effects of climate change. Although eco-anxiety is linked to emotions like grief, guilt, anger and despair,[2] it is not completely negative as it has an adaptive dimension**,** known as practical anxiety[3] that is connected to expectation, motivation and hope. It signals awareness of ecological crises and can foster engagement. This form of anxiety signals attunement[4] to environmental values and motivates action, making it potentially beneficial for environmental stewardship and personal wellbeing.

[1] Panu Pihkala, "Eco-Anxiety, Tragedy, and Hope: Psychological and Spiritual Dimensions of Climate Change," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 53, no. 2 (June 2018): 546, https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12407.

[2] Since the 2000s, scholars have taken more interest in the connections between emotions and the climate crisis. From 2010, the relationship between emotions and pro-environmental behaviour has gained interest. This growing interest in eco-anxiety and climate anxiety prompted further research into emotions and mental health. Ongoing research shows that climate related emotions shape behaviour; however, because these interactions are extremely complex, finding solutions remains challenging. Panu Pihkala, "Toward a Taxonomy of Climate Emotions," *Frontiers in Climate* 3 (2022): Article 738154. For a very good overview of emotions, see Pihkala, "Toward," 1–22.

[3] Practical anxiety is the discomfort experienced when facing a difficult decision. In an ecological context, it emerges from uncertainty about how to respond to environmental threats. Charlie Kurth and Panu Pihkala, "Eco-anxiety: What It Is and Why It Matters," *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (2022): Article 981814: 1–13, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.981814.

[4] They give the example of Greta Thunberg for moral attunement because her emotions align with what is important for the planet and she acts accordingly. Kurth and Pihkala, "Eco-anxiety," 1–13.

Pihkala notes that "eco-anxiety is, on the whole, an emotion that can make important contributions to our environmental agency and wellbeing."[5] However, its aversive nature makes it a double-edged sword because while it can motivate action, it can also lead to stress, burnout or denial, depending on coping resources and context.

On a positive note, environmental issues are slowly being acknowledged as sources of grief. Anxiety Ireland reports that eco-anxiety is one of the fastest-growing forms of anxiety in Ireland.[6] Pihkala applies the idea of "binocular vision," a term originally coined by psychologist Wilfred Bion. This term recognises that various realities coexist in any situation. In relation to climate change and the Anthropocene, it means acknowledging positive and negative developments.[7] Binocular vision offers a balanced perspective between optimism and pessimism, helping to counter the distortions of sensationalised media and encouraging engagement with scientific evidence that provides reliable guidance. Increased awareness of the effects of climate change can increase anxiety levels, leading to concerns about environmental issues, climate change and the perceived threats these challenges pose to the planet's future. This reflects worries about potential economic impacts, materialism and consumerism affecting the environment. Eco-anxiety can become overwhelming, especially as climate-related concerns escalate.

Deane-Drummond also emphasises that eco-anxiety has a dual nature: it can inspire productive action, but it can also trigger negative emotions such as despair and hopelessness.[8] By understanding the contributing factors and implementing strategies to address these concerns, we can effectively manage eco-anxiety. By acknowledging the existence of eco-anxiety and learning to live with it, we can strengthen resilience. There is a need to shift focus from individual desires to effectively address eco-anxiety, improve wellbeing and promote sustainability. Deane-Drummond argues that contemporary challenges are as much psychological as they are physical, and that the need for healing is connected to increasing levels of anxiety and fear, with climate anxiety as an example.[9]

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[5] Kurth and Pihkala, "Eco-anxiety," 10.

[6] For more on this see "Climate Anxiety/Eco-Anxiety," Anxiety Ireland, accessed August 18, 2025, https://www.anxietyireland.ie/climate-anxiety/

[7] For example, even in countries with poor leadership on climate concerns, there will still be people that are passionate about addressing climate change. In 2018, many students took part in an international movement called Fridays for Future, also known as the School Strike for Climate, founded by Greta Thunberg. Students skipped classes on Fridays to demand action from political leaders to address climate change and transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy. Pihkala, "Eco-Anxiety," 545–569.

[8] Celia Deane-Drummond, "Enabling resilience through developing ecological virtues: Coping with Crisis: hospitality, security, and the search for faithful connections," *International Academy of Practical Theology Conference Series,* no. 3 (June 2023): 10–17.

[9] Deane-Drummond, "Enabling," 10–17.

She questions the delay in learning from these challenges, suggesting that unresolved tensions between personal desires and communal responsibility hinder progress. She believes that confronting these issues can result in strong, resilient communities. Proposing constructive responses to environmental challenges is essential for sustainable human development.[10] It is also important to recognise that eco-anxiety affects both those directly impacted by climate change and those who witness its effects on others. For communities experiencing climate-related harm first-hand, eco-anxiety may have both psychological and physical dimensions. Economic limitations and limited political power to address environmental threats intensify feelings of vulnerability and raise concerns about the capacity to bring about meaningful change.

Although eco-anxiety can lead to greater awareness of the climate change crisis, its impact remains limited without corresponding action. Deane-Drummond claims that this may stem from the complexity of discerning the necessary elements for achieving environmental justice. Practical wisdom,[11] developed through careful consideration, facilitates accurate judgements and effective implementation.[12] The pursuit of practical wisdom is valued across various cultures and religious traditions. Christian principles can inform decision-making and inspire positive action by promoting social justice. To address eco-anxiety effectively, it is essential to examine the concrete causes of climate change and identify actions that can help to reduce its impacts.

Concrete Causes

The response to climate change is shaped by political, economic and social factors. In the Western world, values significantly influence how individuals and governments address climate change. Our treatment of others and of the planet raises questions about the external nature of faith. Christian faith influences how its community engages with the planet, reflecting its earthy incarnational theology.[13] There is a distinction between happiness and joy: the transient nature of happiness, often linked to consumerism, contrasts with the lasting experience of joy. Consumerism, with its emphasis on goods and services, can blur the lines between needs and wants.[14]

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[10] Deane-Drummond, "Enabling," 10–17.

[11] This is decision-making based on considering different options and consequences before choosing the best possible outcome.

[12] Celia Deane-Drummond, "A Recovery of Practical Wisdom for Sustainable Futures: A Theological Perspective," *CUSP essay series on the Morality of Sustainable Prosperity*, no. 8 (April 2019): 3–15.

[13] Elizabeth Breuilly, Celia Deane-Drummond and Martin Palmer, *Faith in the Future: Christian Involvement in Shaping our Society: A Study Guide* (London: Harper Collins, 1991).

[14] Celia Deane-Drummond, *A Primer in Ecotheology: Theology for a Fragile Earth* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017).

Many people struggle with societal pressures regarding modern wants. Deane-Drummond asserts that needs and wants should reflect the external implications of the Christian faith, particularly regarding environmental impact and vulnerable communities. Consumerist lifestyles and throwaway society lack concern about the cost of production or resources used. There is no attempt to replace what has become depleted. Instead, companies move on and destroy other areas, such as forests, clean water, soil and fish stocks. Awareness of the means of production can influence choices, but comprehension is lacking. Elizabeth Breuilly, Deane-Drummond and Martin Palmer assert that "God's creation is dying, and we are primarily responsible."[15] Human demands have reduced and affected lands, caused flooding, increased temperatures as well as the extinction of species. To make a difference there needs to be common ground.

Deane-Drummond believes that if we reduce natural resources and creatures to objects of utility, we overlook their true worth and significance in the world.[16] Society needs to restore the connection between humanity and the natural world. True joy stems from freeing oneself from the demands of consumerism and media pressure. Finding contentment with what we have rather than what we desire can lead us to appreciate the joy in seemingly insignificant moments. By recognising God in the simplicity of daily life, we can cultivate happiness and peace, fostering a sense of wonder and connection with humanity, animals and the planet. Addressing economic strain requires a re-evaluation of priorities; this involves shifting from materialism towards a more holistic understanding of happiness that promotes connection, ethical considerations and sustainable living.

Economic Strain: Materialism and Consumerism

Materialism and consumerism intensify economic strain, underscoring the need for more meaningful approaches to goods and value. Viewing goods through the lens of relationships encourages mutual benefits and highlights intrinsic values associated with moral growth. By understanding the importance of religion, communities seek to align their pursuit of goods with planetary wellbeing, fostering sustainable consumption habits and environmental stewardship.

Changing consumption patterns is a complex challenge that can stem from a lack of appreciation for the natural world. In today's society, many individuals are disconnected from nature, leading to unsustainable consumption habits and focusing on material possessions rather than environmental stewardship. Deane-Drummond questions the requirements of justice and obligations to others because making the right decisions involves a balance between fulfilling our desires and considering the common good. When we prioritise the common good, we are acknowledging the importance of collective wellbeing over personal desires. This requires us to consider how our actions affect society as a whole and can help

[15] Breuilly, Deane-Drummond and Palmer, *Faith in the Future*, 81–82.
[16] Deane-Drummond, *A Primer.*

tackle environmental injustice. In light of this, it is clear that contemplation and hope are necessary for achieving a harmonious balance between personal desires and the common good.

Reconnecting with Creation and Community

Contemplative practices and the virtue of hope promote a slower and more mindful lifestyle, encouraging reconnection with others, nature and ourselves. This shift away from the technocratic paradigm, which threatens the planet's future, leads to benefits like stress reduction and improved wellbeing. Acknowledging the limitations of technology highlights the importance of human connection and compassion in addressing environmental challenges and social injustice. Integral ecology is a theological and philosophical commitment to valuing all life, with a particular focus on the vulnerable.[17] It offers a holistic view of the world, emphasising the interconnectedness of society, the environment and spirituality.[18]

Eco-theology builds on this by exploring the spiritual and theological dimensions of humanity's relationship with the natural world. In contrast, consumerism drives the constant desire for the latest products, resulting in a cycle of unfulfilled satisfaction that shapes modern society. This dominant mindset prioritises material possessions and economic growth,[19] often at the expense of personal responsibility and the consequences of our choices. Deane-Drummond asserts the need to challenge the societal tendency to idealise the market economy because "you cannot serve God and Mammon."[20]

Wellbeing plays an important role in environmental justice. Focusing on ecological wellbeing can address environmental issues in a holistic manner that includes the interconnectedness of health, social justice and sustainability. Addressing the challenges of materialism will be significant, but strategies such as raising awareness of its environmental impact can encourage lifestyle changes that prioritise ecological integrity and social justice. Addressing materialism involves building relationships, expressing gratitude and acknowledging the interconnectedness of all creation. This emphasises that genuine joy comes from our connection with other people, nature, animals and God, rather than material possessions. By being content with what we already have, we can diminish our dependence on consumerism. Being in nature, engaging in outdoor activities or spending time with friends and family enriches our lives in a meaningful way and helps to shift

[17] Celia Deane-Drummond and Séverine Deneulin, "Integral Ecology: Discovering Its Meaning and Depth," *LSRI Briefing Note 1*. Oxford: Laudato Si' Research Institute, Campion Hall, 2021.
[18] Deane-Drummond, "What Are the Resources for Building a Christian Ethos in a Time of Ecological Devastation?" in *Christian Faith and the Earth, Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology*, ed. Ernst M. Conradie et al. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 157–76.
[19] This also contributes to eco-anxiety.
[20] Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008), 19.

our attention to what we truly value in life. This awareness encourages us to contemplate our sense of purpose and connection that transcends materialism.

Contemplation

Contemplation is a practice that involves being fully present and aware of our surrounding environment.[21] Some practices include mindfulness, meditation, engaging with nature and self-reflection. There is a growing awareness of the effects of climate change, particularly the increase in extreme weather events. Deane-Drummond claims that our actions[22] have over-formed the planet with minimal consideration for long-term consequences.[23] This highlights the value of contemplation in reducing eco-anxiety. Contemplation involves a deep engagement with creation, promoting wonder while encouraging detachment from egoism.[24] Pope Benedict XVI once remarked that "the external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast."[25] This indicates that a lack of spiritual connection exacerbates global issues such as climate change and poverty. Pope Francis in *Laudato si*' also presents the climate crisis as spiritual, emphasising contemplation as essential for restoring harmony within oneself and to combat the misuse of our common home.[26] Francis believes that through contemplation, individuals can find peace, deepen their understanding of nature, recognise the interconnectedness of creation and experience God's love.

Contemplation is important when fostering a caring relationship with the environment because it is necessary for creating a sustainable future where humanity co-exists harmoniously with the natural world. Contemplation promotes compassion and understanding towards oneself and others. Deane-Drummond views contemplation as a reawakening and a way to challenge egocentrism, promoting

[21] Celia Deane-Drummond and Séverine Deneulin, "Contemplation: Exploring its Meaning and Implications," *LSRI Briefing Note 3*. Oxford: Laudato Si' Research Institute, Campion Hall, 2021.
[22] Some examples are burning fossil fuels, pollution, industrialisation and deforestation.
[23] Celia Deane-Drummond, "Evolution: A Theology of Niche Construction for the Twenty-First Century," in *Theology and Ecology across the Disciplines: On Care of Our Common Home*, ed. Celia Deane-Drummond and Rebecca Artinian-Kaiser (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 241–56.
[24] Deane-Drummond and Deneulin, "Contemplation."
[25] Benedict XVI, *Mass, Imposition of the Pallium and Conferral of the Fisherman's Ring for the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome: Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html.
[26] Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Participants in the Meeting of the Laudato Si' Communities* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2020/september/documents/papa-francesco_20200912_comunita-laudatosi.html.

environmental stewardship and framing contemplation as an active form of engagement.[27]

Contemplation acts as a fundamental process of fostering wisdom as it can influence decision-making and help individuals to consider their options and outcomes. Engaging in contemplative practices helps individuals to carefully consider the advantages and disadvantages of their choices, rather than acting on impulse. This leads to better-informed decisions that are connected to personal values. Contemplation improves decision-making and reduces eco-anxiety by strengthening environmental connections. Contemplation also fosters hope, which motivates persistent action and a belief in a better future, inspiring environmental stewardship and sustainable practices.

Hope

Hope as a theological virtue provides a framework for addressing climate change that goes beyond optimism,[28] inspiring ecological restoration. It is also part of the human experience, making it socially and culturally relevant and essential for integral ecology. Hope, driven by care and responsibility, is crucial for safeguarding the planet, fostering courage and promoting positive change by believing in a better future, even in challenging times. Environmental action is strengthened by community support, building resilience and encouraging engagement. Hope can transform ecological difficulties into action, encouraging individuals and communities to find solutions. Hope is often present in climate-affected communities, particularly in indigenous communities due to their respect for nature, solidarity and compassion.[29] These communities show resilience in protecting their land despite setbacks.

A relationship exists between eco-anxiety, hope and a connection to nature because connecting with nature can reduce eco-anxiety and foster hope for the future.[30] Addressing eco-anxiety involves building resilience through respect and responsibility for the planet. This can be achieved by incorporating a better understanding of environmental issues and promoting a sense of community. Building resilience also requires coping strategies to manage eco-anxiety, which can include mindfulness and environmental advocacy to focus on positive action.

[27] Deane-Drummond, "What are the Resources for Building a Christian Ethos in a Time of Ecological Devastation."

[28] Deane-Drummond agrees that hope and optimism need to be distinguished as hope can face positive and negative outcomes unlike optimism.

[29] Deane-Drummond, "Enabling."

[30] This can also have the opposite effect because if eco-anxiety is not addressed properly, it can create a sense of disconnect.

Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has explored eco-anxiety and eco-theology, highlighting the consequences of humanity's resource exploitation on our relationship with the planet. Defining eco-anxiety through the lens of economic strain and materialism and incorporating insights from Deane-Drummond and Pihkala, emphasises the importance of addressing these issues that contribute to eco-anxiety. This discussion has highlighted the significance of justice, values, contemplation and the virtue of hope in promoting responsible stewardship of creation for a more harmonious coexistence with the environment. This approach enhances contentment and joy in daily life and fosters meaningful connections with humanity and the natural world, helping to reduce the feeling of isolation and eco-anxiety.

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ÉMERVEILLEMENT FACE À LA NATURE ET CONSTRUCTION DU BIEN COMMUN—UNE RELECTURE DE JOB 42

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Extrait

La lettre encyclique *Laudato si* consacre quelques lignes à la notion d'émerveillement face à la nature (§11) et aux efforts que les communautés chrétiennes devraient mener en matière d'éducation à la beauté (§215). Une relecture non-anthropocentrée du livre de Job nous permet de relier cette notion d'émerveillement à celle de réinvention du bien commun. Le chapitre 42 du livre de Job, chapitre final, met en scène sa restauration, suite au discours adressé par Yhwh sur les merveilles du cosmos et de la vie sauvage. Dans ce chapitre conclusif, Job nomme explicitement ses trois filles et leur accorde une part d'héritage. Ainsi, la confrontation de Job à la beauté et la liberté de la vie sauvage l'amène à développer non seulement une attention et une tendresse vis-à-vis de ses filles mais également à développer, au nom de la justice, une créativité institutionnelle. L'expérience par l'homme de l'émerveillement face à la vie sauvage, nous suggère le livre de Job, est une source de ses engagements futurs et du développement d'une éthique de la créativité. Job est entré dans une dynamique de recherche du bien commun. Cette recherche n'est cependant légitime qu'en ce qu'elle respecte les limites fixées aux sociétés humaines.

Mots-clés : livre de Job ; émerveillement ; sublime ; bien commun ; théologie écologique ; *Laudato si'* ; herméneutique non anthropocentrée.

Introduction

La publication de la lettre encyclique *Laudato si*[1] du pape François a créé une dynamique de renouvellement pour la doctrine sociale de l'Eglise. La lettre encyclique évoque notamment la question de l'émerveillement face à la nature :

> Si nous nous approchons de la nature et de l'environnement sans cette ouverture à l'étonnement et à l'émerveillement, si nous ne

[1] François, *Laudato si. Lettre encyclique sur la sauvegarde de la maison commune* (Paris : Bayard / Cerf / Mâme, 2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/fr/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

> parlons plus le langage de la fraternité et de la beauté dans notre relation avec le monde, nos attitudes seront celles du dominateur, du consommateur ou du pur exploiteur de ressources, incapable de fixer des limites à ses intérêts immédiats.[2]

La lettre encyclique insiste par ailleurs sur l'apprentissage de la contemplation esthétique : « *Prêter attention à la beauté, et l'aimer, nous aide à sortir du pragmatisme utilitariste.* »[3]

Ces extraits de l'encyclique expriment ce qui motive depuis de nombreuses années les mouvements engagés dans l'éducation à l'environnement. Ils font aussi écho à des textes bibliques dont il est urgent de redécouvrir la profondeur.

Cette situation d'émerveillement apparaît au sein du livre de Job, dans la confrontation du héros à la vie sauvage mise en scène dans la réponse de Dieu à Job aux chapitres 38 à 41. Dans ces chapitres, Dieu expose à Job des saynètes animalières où ceux-ci sont présentés en gestation, élevant leurs petits, cherchant leur nourriture en chassant ou en parcourant les territoires que Dieu leur a attribués. Les rédacteurs du texte déploient à cette occasion une véritable écopoétique, jouant sur les champs lexicaux, mais également les figures de style, les assonances et les homophonies pour faire de ce discours de Dieu un tableau vivant où se croisent les différentes espèces sauvages.

Le 42ème et dernier chapitre présente les effets de la transformation de Job. Pour autant, le texte ne dit pas clairement ce qui a provoqué une conversion de son regard. La plupart des commentateurs au cours du XXème siècle, suivant une tendance anthropocentriste de l'interprétation biblique, ont refusé de considérer que le contenu du discours de Dieu pouvait en être la cause : à la rigueur, pourrait-elle être l'effet de la seule présence de son Dieu. A notre sens, c'est la confrontation à la liberté radicale de la vie sauvage qui a conduit Job à changer jusqu'à son comportement éthique (Ière partie). L'expérience par l'homme de l'émerveillement face à la vie sauvage, nous suggère le livre de Job, est une source de ses engagements futurs et du développement d'une éthique de la créativité. Job est entré dans une dynamique de recherche du bien commun. Cette recherche n'est cependant légitime qu'en ce qu'elle respecte les limites fixées aux sociétés humaines (IIème partie).

L'EMERVEILLEMENT FACE A LA VIE SAUVAGE, SOURCE DE CREATIVITE ETHIQUE ET SOCIALE

Mobiliser la notion de sublime pour décrire l'expérience vécue par Job

La rencontre de Job avec Dieu ne se situe pas uniquement sur un plan intellectuel mais tout autant sur un plan sensitif et corporel. Lorsque Job ose une réponse, il

[2] François, *Laudato si*, §11.
[3] François, *Laudato si*, §215.

utilise des expressions communes qui listent plusieurs parties de son corps, comme pour indiquer que celui-ci est intégralement affecté par cette rencontre : par la main que Job met sur sa bouche (Jb 40,4), par ses oreilles et ses yeux (Jb 42,5).

Job a vu son créateur de ses yeux, lui qui ne le connaissait que par ouï-dire. Bernd Janowski[4] note l'importance de cette expérience sensorielle et sa spécificité par rapport à d'autres textes qui affirment son impossibilité (Dt 4,12, par opposition à Ex 24,11). Jb 42,5 fait écho à la profession de foi de Jb 19,27 dans laquelle Job affirme qu'il verra son Go'el, son sauveur.

Surtout (Jb 42,3), Job a vu ses merveilles (פלא). En Jb 10,16, Job avait utilisé le même terme dans un sens sarcastique : les fameuses merveilles de Dieu consistaient à le tyranniser … Au chapitre 42, ces merveilles ont le caractère d'un mystère. Il ne les comprend pas, elles le dépassent et il en demeure ignorant…quand bien même (Jb 42,5) Job a désormais vu Dieu de ses propres yeux et a ainsi acquis une connaissance intime de Dieu. Dans les chapitres 38 à 41, Dieu a fait état à Job de son « *dessein* » (*esah,* voir Jb 38,2). Il lui a notamment présenté la liberté irréductible de l'âne sauvage, du buffle, de l'autruche ou de ces deux animaux fantastiques que sont Béhémoth et Léviathan. Face à cette liberté, les réflexes de prédation, de soumission ou les prétentions à la primauté de l'homme sont ridiculisés.

La notion de sublime, développée par la philosophie de l'esthétique, est à même de décrire ce mouvement de l'âme de Job, confronté à l'incommensurable des deux animaux fabuleux, en particulier, qui retire au sujet tous ses repères mais dans le même temps l'amène dans un voyage extatique. Baldine Saint Girons définit ainsi le sublime :

> Avec le sublime surgit une certaine forme de réalité qui nous met en cause en nous éblouissant et renouvelle le sentiment de notre présence au monde. Un nouvel enjeu fait irruption hors du temps et bloque l'horizon. Au vacillement du sensible répond alors la suspension du moi. […]
>
> Sublime de l'océan, calme ou déchaîné, du désert qui anéantit toute idée de vie, des montagnes invincibles, du ciel étoilé au-dessus de nous… […]
>
> Elaborer une philosophie du sublime, c'est construire la définition d'un *objet évanescent* et rebelle à tout canon, en saisir les effets sur un *témoin* non pas humilié, mais *contraint à l'humilité,* et rechercher l'*enjeu* qui lui est alors révélé. […]
>
> Le sublime n'est pas : il *advient.* Et son avènement exige la métamorphose […]. Alors que la contemplation du beau ne rend pas beau, alors que la reconnaissance du bon reste souvent périphérique

[4] Bernd Janowski, *Dialogues conflictuels avec Dieu. Une anthropologie des Psaumes* (Genève : Labor et fides, 2008), 109.

> et objective, l'identification du sublime *devrait* d'une certaine manière rendre sublime.[5]

Développée dans le champ de la rhétorique par le Pseudo-Longin (I^er^ siècle), traduit par Boileau (1674), la notion est reprise par la philosophie de l'esthétique. Pour Burke[6] comme pour Kant,[7] le sublime génère un ébranlement de l'individu qui le conduit à une élévation de l'ordre du plaisir pour le premier et de l'esprit pour le second. Chez Kant, à la différence de la catégorie du beau, le sublime, que l'on subit et éprouve comme un dessaisissement, provoque « *un sentiment d'arrêt des forces vitales* » (*Hemmung*) qui est cependant le préalable à une réaction de l'imagination, la *Widerstand*, qui permet l'étirement des puissances de l'homme.[8]

Lorsque Burke et Kant écrivent sur la notion de sublime, ils prennent tous deux l'exemple du livre de Job et du discours de Dieu. Pour Burke, le bestiaire de Job serait la cause d'un « sublime de la terreur », dont le paroxysme serait l'apparition de Béhémoth et du Léviathan, mais aussi, avec l'âne sauvage, de liberté par rapport au pouvoir de l'homme. Cette confrontation plongerait Job dans l'anxiété de son impuissance face à ces forces.[9] Selon Carol Newsom,[10] Burke serait le premier à analyser la réponse de Dieu à Job à la manière d'une « thérapie existentielle » propre, par la confrontation au chaos, d'enseigner la maîtrise de ses peurs. Il s'agirait d'un sublime « *tragique* ». Carol Newsom évoque par ailleurs une « dynamique extatique », un transport généré par la confrontation à une rhétorique du sublime.

Baldine Saint Girons insiste sur l'importance du clair-obscur dans cette expérience esthétique du sublime. La confrontation entre le crépuscule abyssal et le jaillissement de la lumière est un motif d'expression de la conversion la plus intense que l'on retrouve ailleurs dans l'œuvre du Caravage avec l'*Éblouissement de Saint-Paul*.

Au sein du livre de Job, la fresque attribuée à Dieu lui-même joue, à travers les méandres de l'obscurité, à laisser surgir une lumière de vie qui illumine Job et le fait participer à la connaissance divine. L'ironie de Dieu envers Job est aussi une

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[5] Baldine Saint Girons, *Fiat lux. Une philosophie du sublime* (Paris : Quai Voltaire, Edima, 1993), avant-propos.

[6] Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757).

[7] Emmanuel Kant, *Observations sur le sentiment du beau et du sublime*, trad. R. Kempf (Paris : Vrin, 1992).

[8] Emmanuel Kant, *Remarques touchant les « Observations sur le sentiment du beau et du sublime »*, trans. Brigitte Geonget (Paris : Vrin, 1994).

[9] Kant, pour sa part, insistera sur le sublime de la protestation de Job, qui s'exprime en dépit de ce qu'il y a de plus effrayant.

[10] Carol Ann Newsom, *The Book of Job, A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (New York : Oxford University Press, 2003).

invitation à partager sa considération et sa sollicitude pour l'ensemble de la Création.

Du dessaisissement à la créativité éthique

Le lecteur comprend que la transformation de Job ne peut pas relever de la seule découverte du comportement éthique. En effet, dès le début du récit, Job apparaît comme le plus juste des hommes et est décrit par Dieu lui-même comme « *intègre et droit* » (Jb 1,8 et 2,3). Job plaçait son amour de la justice au centre de son ancienne fonction de magistrat (Jb 29) : il était attentif au pauvre et à l'orphelin, à la veuve et aux plus vulnérables. Il garantissait l'équité à tout inconnu et chassait les comportements injustes. Il était plein de pitié et d'empathie pour les plus pauvres (Jb 30,25). L'existence de l'injustice est d'ailleurs un reproche majeur que Job fait à Dieu, puisque partout les méchants prospèrent alors que les justes comme lui connaissent la misère.

Son cri vers Dieu est toujours exprimé au nom de la justice. L'épilogue donne néanmoins deux indications d'un changement de Job. Job déploie à l'égard de ses filles une tendresse dont il n'avait pas encore été fait état dans le récit. Il a également découvert qu'il pouvait poursuivre son action de justice d'une manière que Vogels propose de qualifier « *d'éthique de la créativité* ».[11]

Telle une *happy end*, le chapitre 42 met en scène la restauration de Job concernant sa richesse, qui dépasse sa richesse passée, mais également son statut social et familial : il a désormais sept fils et trois filles. L'unique aspect qui démontre un changement du comportement de Job, curieusement, a trait à ses trois filles. Elles sont les seules à être nommées dans le texte ; les sept garçons resteront anonymes. Job choisit pour elles trois noms poétiques, Yemima (Tourterelle), Kecia (Fleur-de-cannelle) et Kérên Happou'h (Ombre-à-paupière), comme témoignage de cette tendresse nouvelle.

Ce détail contraste avec le comportement de Job avant sa chute. Job avait déjà sept fils et trois filles (Jb 1,2–5), que le texte ne nomme pas. Job, par méfiance envers leurs banquets, procédait à des sacrifices de purification afin de prévenir l'hypothèse où ils auraient péché et maudit le Seigneur en pensée, et ainsi attenté à la piété de sa maisonnée. Cette prévention ne ressemble pas vraiment à un amour filial. Dans les versets 13 à 19, Job apprend la mort de ses enfants à la suite de la disparition de ses troupeaux. De désespoir (Jb 1,20–21), Job prend le deuil en se décrivant comme nu devant la perte de tous ses biens. Sa plainte ne mentionne jamais ses enfants, dont la valeur semble égaler celle des troupeaux volés. Job se lamente sur la chute de sa maisonnée… davantage que sur le décès de ses enfants.

Par ailleurs, Job établit entre ses filles et leurs frères une part équitable d'héritage. La conséquence économique et sociale de cette institution est de garantir

[11] Walter Vogels, « The inner development of Job. One more look at psychology and the Book of Job », *Science et Esprit*, XXXV/2 (1983): 227–230.

leur indépendance. L'épisode des filles de Çelophehad dès l'arrivée en terre promise (Nb 27,1–11 et 36,1–12) illustre à quel point la question de l'équité entre hommes et femmes se concentre sur le sujet de l'héritage. Le sort des femmes apparaît dans le livre des Nombres indissociable de la question de la pérennité des clans et de l'équilibre de la répartition des terres entre tribus d'Israël. L'héritage n'est possible pour les filles que lorsqu'un homme n'a pas eu de fils (Nb 27,8). Le livre de Ruth témoigne par ailleurs de la fragilité économico-juridique des femmes en situation de veuvage, devant compter avec le « droit de rachat » des hommes membres de la famille (Rt 4,1–6).

Les trois filles de Job seront, elles, libres et indépendantes.

UNE DYNAMIQUE DU BIEN COMMUN DANS LE RESPECT DES FRONTIERES DE LA VIE SAUVAGE

L'extension du bien commun au sein des sociétés humaines

Au nom de l'équité, Job n'hésite pas à subvertir une pierre angulaire du droit coutumier, qui devait pourtant apparaître aux mentalités du Proche-Orient antique comme relevant du « sens commun ». Le choix de Job de définir une autre règle de répartition de son héritage ne relève pas seulement de la sphère privée et du comportement individuel : Job agit non seulement en tant que père mais également en tant que magistrat, à même de refonder la norme sociale.

Selon Ricoeur, le partage est le cœur de l'acte de juger : « Dans partage il y a part, à savoir ce qui nous sépare : ma part n'est pas votre part ; mais le partage c'est aussi ce qui nous fait partager, c'est-à-dire, au sens fort du mot : prendre part à. »[12] En ceci, le partage peut être la « métaphore » de « quelque chose comme un bien commun, consistant en valeurs partagées ; on aurait affaire là à la dimension communautaire sous-jacente à la dimension purement procédurale de la structure sociétale ». Le partage est ainsi une condition de l'émergence du sujet au sein d'un entre-nous communautaire ou social.

En étant nommées individuellement, les filles de Job deviennent, à la fin du récit, des héroïnes pleines et entières. Lorsqu'il les intègre au partage de son héritage, Job fait accéder ses filles à la communauté en tant que sujet de droit pleinement capables. Elles se tiennent à présent « au milieu de leurs frères ». Job a élargi la communauté politique (l'entre-soi du clan) à la participation de celles qui en étaient exclues.

Job a ainsi enclenché une dynamique de transformation sociale. Comme l'écrit Henri de Ternay : « La réponse de Dieu invite à entendre la justice comme une recherche communautaire d'une vie de qualité pour tous, dans un contexte de liberté et de solidarité ».[13]

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[12] Paul Ricoeur, *Le Juste*, t.1 (Paris : Editions Esprit, 1995), 127.

[13] Henri de Ternay, *Avec Job. De l'épreuve à la conversion* (Bruxelles : Lumen Vitae, 2007), 160.

La confrontation de Job au sublime de la vie sauvage a provoqué une capacité de dessaisissement, qui s'est révélée être la condition d'une créativité sociale et institutionnelle, bien au-delà de ce que l'on attendrait d'un patriarche ou d'un chef de cité.

Une telle lecture du livre de Job entre en résonance avec les débats contemporains sur le contenu de la doctrine sociale de l'Église. La constitution pastorale *Gaudium et spes* rappelle que la vocation des biens de la création à profiter à toutes et tous repose sur un principe de justice qui doit s'incarner dans des coutumes ou des institutions. Ces institutions ont à la fois pour mission de garantir une pérennité des mécanismes de redistribution mais également de s'adapter et de se développer :

> […] les biens de la création doivent équitablement affluer entre les mains de tous, selon la règle de la justice, inséparable de la charité. Quelles que soient les formes de la propriété, adaptées aux légitimes institutions des peuples, selon des circonstances diverses et changeantes, on doit toujours tenir compte de cette destination universelle des biens. […]
>
> Fréquemment, dans des sociétés économiquement moins développées, la destination commune des biens est partiellement réalisée par des coutumes et des traditions communautaires, garantissant à chaque membre les biens les plus nécessaires. Certes, il faut éviter de considérer certaines coutumes comme tout à fait immuables, si elles ne répondent plus aux nouvelles exigences de ce temps ; mais, à l'inverse, il ne faut pas attenter imprudemment à ces coutumes honnêtes qui, sous réserve d'une saine modernisation, peuvent encore rendre de grands services. De même, dans les pays économiquement très développés, un réseau d'institutions sociales, d'assurance et de sécurité, peut réaliser en partie la destination commune des biens. Il importe de poursuivre le développement des services familiaux et sociaux, principalement de ceux qui contribuent à la culture et à l'éducation.[14]

La pensée contemporaine est marquée par les travaux de l'économiste Elinor Ostrom15 sur la gouvernance des biens communs et la possibilité de solutions d'auto-organisation et d'auto-gouvernance permettant la préservation des ressources communes. Elinor Ostrom a analysé la gestion de forêts, de systèmes

[14] Concile Vatican II. *Gaudium et spes : Constitution pastorale sur l'Église dans le monde de ce temps*, §69 (Cité du Vatican : Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_fr.html.

[15] Elinor Ostrom, *La Gouvernance des biens communs : Pour une nouvelle approche des ressources naturelles*, trans. Laurent Baechler (Paris : De Boeck, 2010).

d'irrigation ou encore de pêcheries sur différents continents et met en lumière l'importance des savoirs accumulés par les populations locales concernées qui conditionnent la robustesse de cette auto-organisation.

Selon Gaël Giraud,[16] le partage des ressources est constitutif, depuis les Actes des Apôtres, de la communauté chrétienne. L'imaginaire de la mise en commun des biens au sein des premières églises aurait permis dans l'histoire l'émergence des biens communs, dont la gestion est partagée par le corps social. La pratique et la détermination de nouveaux communs serait un apprentissage à ressembler à Dieu.[17] Gaël Giraud cite Thomas d'Aquin[18] s'inquiétant des conséquences économiques, en termes d'inégalités et d'accumulation de richesse, que porterait l'application stricte de la règle de partage de la terre de Nb 33,53–54. Il identifie, dans d'autres sources scripturaires (Dt 22,1–4 et 24,19 ; Lv 19,9 et 25,4 ; Ex 23,11), le moyen de définir une attention à la disponibilité des ressources. Thomas d'Aquin donnerait ainsi un exemple de la façon dont la créativité permettrait de redéfinir de manière plus juste les règles instituées de partage.

La limite posée par le droit des autres créatures de Dieu

La subtilité du livre de Job est d'introduire une nuance : le partage au sein de la communauté humaine a cependant une limite. A propos de Léviathan, Dieu a fait remarquer à Job que les humains seraient bien incapables de le vendre en morceaux : « Est-ce que les associés—de pêche—spéculeront sur lui ? Sera-t-il dépecé entre les commerçants ? » (Jb 40,30), sous peine de mort. « Place ta paume sur lui… et rappelle-toi du combat que tu auras provoqué ! » (Jb 40,32) Certaines choses échappent ainsi par principe aux règles de partage entre les hommes, que ces règles soient ou non égalitaires.

Parmi les avatars littéraires du Léviathan, *Moby Dick*, écrit par Herman Melville en 1851, raconte l'acharnement du capitaine Ahab à transgresser cette limite, dans le contexte du développement par les communautés Quakers de l'industrie baleinière aux Etats-Unis. Camille de Tolédo[19] fait remarquer que les patrons de pêche Quakers sont décrits comme des actionnaires de cette industrie, qui par un partage du capital (voir Jb 40,30) accélèrent un dualisme entre la sphère du religieux et la réalité naturelle soumise à la prédation humaine.

De la même façon, les animaux sauvages ne peuvent pas être asservis aux besoins économiques des hommes. Les possessions de Job et son héritage à venir concernent des moutons, des chameaux, des bœufs et des ânesses, mais en aucune manière les onagres, les buffles sauvages ou les bouquetins. Le discours de Dieu

[16] Gaël Giraud, *Composer un monde en commun. Une théologie politique de l'anthropocène* (Paris : Seuil, 2022), 646.
[17] Giraud, *Composer un monde en commun*, 418.
[18] Thomas d'Aquin, *Somme Théologique*, quaestio 66.
[19] Camille de Toledo, *Une Histoire du vertige* (Lagrasse : Verdier, 2023), 149.

à Job, à travers les saynètes de l'âne sauvage et du buffle (Jb 39), tourne en ridicule la vanité humaine et son réflexe irrépressible de domestication de toute vie animale, c'est-à-dire de maîtrise et de soumission du vivant. Le texte entre en confrontation avec une certaine lecture de Gn 1,28 « Emplissez la terre et soumettez là ». L'homme fait les frais d'un comique de situation qui le décrit comme cherchant à domestiquer des êtres incontrôlables, comme l'onagre ou le buffle.

Même la créativité institutionnelle et éthique de Job doit respecter les limites de ce qui est admis pour la société humaine. Il ne s'agit pas ici des limites d'une éthique anthropocentrée, mais des limites de la société humaine et de ses institutions par rapport aux territoires que Dieu a réservé, de droit, à la vie sauvage. A ce titre, le livre de Job offre un écho éblouissant avec les principes de l'écologie profonde, tels que définis par Arne Naess[20] : la vie sauvage a une valeur intrinsèque et l'homme n'a aucun droit de réduire cette richesse et cette diversité, sauf pour satisfaire ses besoins vitaux.

Ainsi, une lecture non-anthropocentrée du livre de Job nous invite à voir dans la confrontation à la vie sauvage l'occasion d'un émerveillement, comme un événement existentiel provoquant une conversion éthique.

Pour revenir sur le titre de notre colloque, au sein d'une Europe contemporaine qui connaît tant l'effondrement de sa biodiversité qu'un mouvement de crispation au détriment des droits de l'Homme, la théologie ne doit pas négliger d'approfondir ces intuitions ouvertes par les textes bibliques et déjà développées au sein du corpus de la doctrine sociale de l'Eglise, quant à la relation entre notre humanité et la vie sauvage. Citons *Laudato si* :

> L'éducation environnementale devrait nous disposer à faire ce saut vers le Mystère, à partir duquel une éthique écologique acquiert son sens le plus profond. Par ailleurs, des éducateurs sont capables de repenser les itinéraires pédagogiques d'une éthique écologique, de manière à faire grandir effectivement dans la solidarité, dans la responsabilité et dans la protection fondée sur la compassion.[21]

S'ouvre ainsi une perspective en matière éducative, sur la façon de favoriser, au sein des mouvements d'Eglise notamment, cette rencontre esthétique avec la nature, qui n'est pas seulement un supplément d'âme mais potentiellement le déclencheur d'un éveil éthique et social. Cette tâche des mouvements d'Eglise, et de l'éducation populaire en général, est d'autant plus indispensable en direction de celles et de ceux qui en sont le plus éloignés pour des raisons d'exclusion sociale.

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[20] Arne Næss, *Ecologie, communauté et style de vie*, trans. Charles Ruelle (Paris : Ed. Dehors, 2013).

[21] François, *Laudato si*, §210.

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THEOLOGISING WITH THE "*TRA*" IN AN INCREASINGLY BORDERLESS WORLD: A MEDITERRANEAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The Mediterranean is well-known for its exceptional biodiversity. However, this fame has become tragic in more recent years, because that common space, with its five shores (Southern Europe, the Near East, the Black and Aegean Seas, the Balkan Peninsula and North Africa), is now the site of thousands of migrant landings. Despite the worldwide media attention, unfortunately often aimed at short-term political gain, this matter deserves proper attention from all spheres of life and knowledge, including theological enquiry, and especially in the Mediterranean riparian continents. This reflection rediscovers the open space of the Mediterranean as a theological *locus*. Drawing from the philosophical insights of the French sinologist François Jullien, I argue that theology in Europe should rediscover the language of the "*tra*" ("between") over "being", which implies maintaining a gaze beyond oneself and beyond identities, a gaze that transcends borders and reaches other shores. The "Mediterranean" (*medius-terra*) thus becomes an adequate place to think the "*tra*" in theology. The latter would also rediscover this *tra*-dimension as not utterly new but already present in the Trinitarian Mystery.

Keywords: Mediterranean theology; *tra*; François Jullien; trinitarian ontology; Piero Coda; dialogue; theological locus; migration.

Premise: The Mediterranean, the *Mare Nostrum* as a Theological Locus

Typing the word "Mediterranean" in any search engine, one would be surprised by the huge literature in recent years and the increasing research around the Mediterranean: specialized schools, conferences, workshops, various publications and initiatives from the Catholic Church and beyond. Why is there so much interest in this reality and what can European theology gain from it?

The Mediterranean should be considered, first of all, as a "terraqueous" space, that is, not only made of water alone, but of water and earth together, side by side or—in a more significant way—living in a reciprocal indwelling. It can be studied through a trinomial that speaks of its geographical personalities: earth–sea–earth,

or sea–strait–sea.[1] This is due to its very meaning and its profound nature: etymologically, "*medius-terra*," that is, "in the middle of the earth," implying already what is "between" (*tra*) the earth.[2] The Latins already perceived an identity bond with this surrounding space, which they called "*Mare Nostrum*" ("our sea"), not so much with the egoistic idea of appropriation, but rather with the consciousness of an open space shared by an exceptional biodiversity. What strikes the most nowadays is that this common space has become the scene of thousands of deaths. Regardless of the worldwide media attention often aimed at short-term political gain, the data, facts and truth about this matter are alarming. The *World Migration Report 2024* shows an increase in deaths across the Mediterranean (recorded deaths as well as those reported as missing from 2014 to October 2023).[3] People migrate all over the world, mainly through safe and orderly means, and—as the first chapter of the above cited *World Migration Report* is entitled—"migration continues to be part of the solution in a rapidly changing world." This world is fast becoming "borderless"—only a blind eye would not see it—and migrations remain a challenge for Europe.[4] In this debate, a theology with a Mediterranean perspective would consist of recognising this space not simply as a mere geographical area subject to political and economic interests, but primarily as a "theological *locus*." Clearly this cannot be done by leaving out the historical data; this must instead be integrated for an effective contextual reflection.[5]

The Italian Christian Democrat Giorgio La Pira pronounced very striking words, in his address to the Egyptian president Nasser, on February 22, 1958: "The Mediterranean can truly become, if pacified, the most luminous space on Earth."[6] This already reveals the theological adequacy of this space, a space—as we shall see—that is suitable for the theological concept of the "*tra*." Therefore, to think of the Mediterranean, not only as a geographical framework, but more still as a "theological *locus*"—thus revising the *De locis theologicis* of Melchor

[1] See Vincent Herbert, "Géographie des détroits méditerranéens," *Hommes et terres du Nord*, no. 2 (2002): 26–29, https://doi.org/10.3406/htn.2002.2950. This brief and incisive work of Herbert clearly shows the rich and complex internal composition of the Mediterranean.

[2] In this chapter, I keep the Italian version of "between" (*tra*) to signify a specific mediterranean context and to speak—at least linguistically—"from" the Mediterranean.

[3] According to this *Report*, the Mediterranean seems to be the deadliest place on the globe as regards migrations: See Marie McAuliffe and Linda Adhiambo Oucho, eds., *World Migration Report 2024* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2024), 61, https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2024.

[4] See Johannes Müller, "Le migrazioni mondiali: Una sfida per l'Europa," *La Civiltà Cattolica* 144, no. 1 (February 1993): 233–46.

[5] See Massimo Serio, "Il dato storico da integrare, per una riflessione sul Mediterraneo autenticamente contestuale," in Matteo Maria Zuppi and Istituto di Storia del Cristianesimo "Cataldo Naro," *Mediterraneo di Pace* (Trapani: il Pozzo di Giacobbe, 2025), 81–87.

[6] Gualtiero Bassetti, "La Pira e il Mediterraneo. Per uno spazio più luminoso," *L'Osservatore Romano*, January 7–8, 2016, https://www.vatican.va/content/osservatore-romano/it/comments/2016/documents/lo-spazio-piu-luminoso.html.

Cano (16th century) and increasing the classic ten *domicilia* (*tópoi*, i.e. "places")—means to acknowledge other possible places where we can find relevant elements for a theological inquiry into the truths about God.[7] The Mediterranean appears as a real space of a possible encounter between (*tra*) people and God and humanity among themselves.[8] To be able to theologise with the Mediterranean "*tra*," I propose we start by apprehending this concept phenomenologically, as it is given to our reason; in this respect, it is important to consider the recent approaches to this question. This first epistemological step would be of great help for the second one, in which, coming to theological intelligence, the relevance of the "*tra*" at the ontological level would be outlined.

[7] See Massimo Naro, *Introduzione alla teologia* (Bologna: EDB, 2020), 225–30.

[8] As already mentioned in the opening lines, important theological studies are being done from this Mediterranean perspective, in recent years. The previous pontificate highly encouraged a serious attention to the reality of this context. In the midst of the tragic events of 2013, in which hundreds of people died in the sinking of boats near the Italian island of Lampedusa, the words of Pope Francis during his homily of Monday July 8 2013 helped awaken public consciousness: "In this globalized world, we have fallen into globalized indifference." Francis, "Homily at the 'Arena' Sports Camp, Lampedusa," July 8, 2013 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html. The same pope, in his Apostolic letter in the form of motu proprio, *Ad theologiam promovendam* (ATP) (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), citing a passage of his previous letter to the Grand Chancellor of the Catholic University of Argentina, writes: "Do not settle for a desktop theology. Your place for reflection is the frontier." (ATP 3). This motu proprio also calls for a theology that is fundamentally contextual. (see ATP 4). The first promising responses to these papal appeals came from Marseille in September 2023 with the publication of the *Manifesto* "For a Theology *from* the Mediterranean" (*https://icm.catholique.fr/la-rencontre-lieu-de-revelation*). Around the drafting of this *Manifesto*, the Mediterranean Theological Network (RTMed) has been formed, and it involves about twenty Mediterranean institutions. This network has held meetings, workshops and conferences for more than two years now. There are already numerous publications that follow the Mediterranean perspective; we can mention a few here: Luigi Borriello and Maria Rosaria Del Genio, eds., *Mistica e dialogo interreligioso nel contesto del Mediterraneo* (Trapani: il pozzo di Giacobbe, 2023). In this volume, about the idea of the Mediterranean as a "theological *locus*," see especially: Giuseppina De Simone, "Il Mediterraneo come luogo teologico nell'oggi della fede e del dialogo interreligioso." In addition: Vito Impellizzeri and Salvatore Rindone, eds., *Paradigma Mediterraneo: Per una Filosofia e una Teologia contestuali* (Trapani: il Pozzo di Giacobbe, 2025). As well as the aforementioned: Zuppi and Istituto di Storia del Cristianesimo, *Mediterraneo di Pace*. For a more extended bibliography, see: https://pensarelafede.com/teologia-dal-mediterraneo/.

François Jullien's Idea of ''*Entre*'' ("*Tra*")

In 2016, the French philosopher and sinologist François Jullien published in L'Herne Editions, a book with the controversial title, *Il n'y a pas d'identité culturelle* (*There Is No Such Thing as Cultural Identity*).[9] In this volume, François Jullien thinks that any account for the diversity of cultures in "differential terms" is "doomed from the start." He therefore proposes a "conceptual shift" and suggests "we approach the diversity of cultures by substituting an exploratory *divide* [*l'écart*] for difference, and *resource* or *fecundity* for identity." Both "difference" and "the divide" mark a separation, but "difference does it through *distinction*, the divide through *distance*." "Difference" is characterized by two things: (1) it aims at defining an identity by ordering. Once this is done, (2) "difference" will cast aside the other. Once I have defined by distinguishing A from B, I no longer need B and I keep A in its identity.

> *Difference*, then, is classificatory and at the same time identificatory. It is by proceeding "from difference to difference," as Aristotle says, that we arrive at a final difference. This final difference delivers the essence of the thing, expressed in a definition. The *divide*, by contrast, is not identificatory but exploratory or "adventurous," giving rise to some other possibility. Thus, a divide has no classifying function but consists precisely in the overflowing of classes. Rather than an orderly array, it produces *disarray* [*non pas un rangement, mais un dérangement*].[10]

Furthermore, Jullien asserts that, with a *divide*, "the two separated terms (A and B) remain face to face … The distance that appears between separated terms maintains tension between them … each remains open to the other, is kept in tension by the other, and must be apprehending itself continually in the face-off. The vis-à-vis is never undone. The *face off* endures, forever keen; it remains intensive." To exemplify this, we can think of two paintings on the wall kept at a right distance—neither too close nor too far—and caught in a unique gaze. Jullien deduces that "through the distance opened between the one and the other, the divide brings forth an 'interspace' ['*entre*' ('between' / '*tra*')], and this *interspace* is active." He continues: "With the divide, and the *interspace* (*tra*) opened by the appearing distance, each term—rather than fold back into itself, rather than rest

[9] We provide a general reference for the citations in this section on Jullien's thought; see François Jullien, *There Is No Such Thing as Cultural Identity*, trans. Pedro Rodriguez (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 23–31 and 53–62. During the International Workshop organised by RTMed (Rete Teologica del Mediterraneo) in 2024 in Palermo (June 24–26), Jullien's talk mainly exposed the ideas we find in these pages of his volume.

[10] Jullien, *There Is No Such Thing as Cultural Identity*.

on itself—remains turned toward the other, set in tension by the other"; rather than "coinciding," it "de-coincides."

Following the above reflection, it appears as a logical consequence, as Jullien himself highlights, that only the "*divide*" can "promote" and "deploy" the "*common*" between cultures. It should be noted that the "divide" is not simply a "between two," but the place where "something" effectively "passes" and where it "happens" (*où ça passe et ça se passe*), where we can circulate, just like in the Mediterranean. For this reason, these concepts, according to the French philosopher, can be used as conceptual tools to think about the Mediterranean and its function as "interspace" or *tra.* However, Jullien thinks that "the divide (*tra*) is ethical and political in vocation." And we might ask: could it not also be theological, that is, something more than a purely phenomenological and interpersonal *datum*? At first glance, the thought of Jullien would seem distant from other fields of thought—including theology—that use the "language of being"; in fact, "to begin thinking about interspace, we must step outside the thought of Being [outside ontology], tread where painters trod before philosophers," Jullien writes. For him, simply put, "between is not being."

The *Tra*-Dimension in Trinitarian Ontology and the Task of Theology

At this point, it is important to delve into theological intelligence, to discover the possibility of the *tra* in the language of being, a "language" that must differ from Jullien's own language, for it draws from the "resource" of Divine Revelation; this language speaks of ontology, so to say, *autrement*. In this respect, we find a great help in the thought of the Italian theologian Piero Coda.[11] He sees the perspective of the "*tra*" according to the logic of what he calls "*Terzo eventuale*" ("eventual Third"), that is, the Spirit who is God and who happens in the event of the "*tra*." He writes: "it is ultimately the eventual and enigmatic 'subject' that correlates the I, the 'you' [A and B in Jullien's terms], the 'we': which, precisely in this, are rendered other than what they were before."[12] Coda reflects on the ontological (and therefore praxeological) status of the "*tra*"—a task that he attributes to the field of trinitarian ontology.[13] From the standpoint of trinitarian ontology, the "*tra*" is seen as a trinitarian "place" of the experience of being,

[11] See Piero Coda, "Il 'Terzo eventuale': Spunti in dialogo per una nuova episteme," *Ho theologos* 42, no. 1 (2024): 85–98. The direct citations of this article are from my personal translation.

[12] Coda, "Terzo eventuale," 86.

[13] This field, in fact, for some years now, has taken up and developed the insights of the German theologian Bishop Klaus Hemmerle. The latter, in his *Theses Towards a Trinitarian Ontology*, sustains that our being-in-Christ not only opens us to the heart of the trinitarian life, but also opens the trinitarian relation between (*tra*) us, in the world (see especially *Theses* nos. 15; 29; 32). The volumes of the *Dizionario Dinamico di Ontologia trinitaria* are a helpful source for a solid reflection on trinitarian ontology; see: https://ontologiatrinitaria.org/ddot/.

thought and action, in which Christ introduces us, within history, with the brothers and sisters. It is—Coda writes:

> … a "place" of "places," therefore, marked by listening, by availability, by the mutual and exceeding gift, by the reciprocal exchange, by the encounter in the Light that illuminates every man and has made his dwelling among us (Jn 1: 2.14). Moving from death to life, from darkness to light, from the "I" to the "we" that opens to all, from indifferent or arrogant self-referentiality to free and constructive conviviality, beginning with the marginalised, the oppressed and the excluded, in the whole of creation.[14]

This is the conversion that can occur in the Mediterranean space; a space that has, already in itself, all these potentialities,[15] and that naturally stands as a *tra* (between), "in the middle," a "place of places." Moreover, thinking of the Holy Spirit as the "eventual Third" that happens in the event of the *tra*, Coda sees this Third as the "agent of purification 'in progress' and of growth even in our relationships: always subject to the temptation of folding back into themselves [the effect of difference and identity already highlighted in Jullien], of the exploitation—even subtle—of the other, of failure, of despair… but each time called anew to the *semper magis* of Him who is greater than our hearts (1 John 3:20)."[16] We equally find, in Coda's earlier thought, an insight that surely goes beyond the philosophical consideration of Jullien; the Italian theologian writes:

> The trinitarian structure and dynamic of human intersubjectivity in Christ occurs in fact in the gratuitous and effusive reciprocity (see Jn 15:12) which is not the simple "face to face" of the two, but occurs in the receiving "space" opened "between" them, thus bringing about that indefinitely open relation which not only touches the other with whom one enters directly into a relationship but the "each-one-

[14] Coda, "Terzo eventuale," 96.

[15] "With regard to the aspect of space, its primal origin in the Trinity lies in the way in which the Persons of the Trinity 'make room' ('space') for one another, granting each other freedom of being and action": Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatik, IV. Das Endspiel* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1983), 82.

[16] Coda, "Terzo eventuale," 97. This presence of the Spirit in our relationships is once more in line with Balthasar's thought: "the Spirit is two things: he is most interior to the 'I', making the person a son and causing him to cry 'Abba, Father'; and he is the socializing 'between,' rooting human fellowship in a (trinitarian) personal depth that cannot be realized by purely earthly means": Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatik, I. Prolegomena* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1973), 605.

> without-a-face" (to say it with P. Ricoeur) that I reach through the mediation of structures and institutions.[17]

From the above considerations, the task of a theology from the Mediterranean—that appears to have the (theological) *tra* as an intrinsic dimension—becomes clear. It should, above all, rediscover the "dialogue principle." The Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar reproposes this principle towards the end of his *Prolegomena*, the first volume of his *Theological Dramatic Theory*; drawing from the "theology of dialogics" closely related to Martin Buber's sketch *Ich und Du*, Balthasar writes:

> The "between" [*tra*] is not constituted by "I" and "thou" in separation but is always the prior place of encounter where both of them become themselves for each other. With a view to this constitutive "between" it is possible to speak of a "relational a priori" in man, that is, of an "inborn thou," designed to realize itself in the encounter with a "thou"; but this realization takes place in the "between."[18]

Applying this to the Mediterranean, we might say that, as a relational space (*a priori*), it manifests the "innate thou" or "relational a priori" in men and cultures. The difficulty with this reasoning is what can be observed *a posteriori*; in fact, the concreteness of "dialogue" is not obvious nor does its meaning clearly come to mind. On this point too, François Jullien has raised a lot of questions.[19] "Dialogue," for Jullien:

> …has itself been stained with suspicion historically. First of all, the West has engaged in "dialogue" with other cultures because of its lost power. […] Yet without dialogue we get "shocks" and clashes. Is there a way out of the dilemma? Or, if it seems a stopgap to avoid open violence, how can we give dialogue a consistency to dignify it and establish it as a vocation? If it is a "soft" term, we must give it a strong sense.

The French sinologist draws this sense from language itself, from the Greek "*dialogos*," thus relating it once more to his concepts of the "*divide*" and the "*common*." In my opinion, dialogue can have a strong sense in the efficient "resource" of theology. The words of the Italian theologian Massimo Naro could not be more explicit in this regard:

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[17] Piero Coda, *From the Trinity: The Coming of God in Revelation and Theology*, ed. William Neu (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 489.
[18] Balthasar, *Prolegomena*, 595.
[19] See Jullien, *Cultural Identity*, 63–75.

> Referring to the Trinity […] helps us grasp the most radical sense and the most effective style of dialogue. First and foremost, it is about going beyond ourselves, not by conquering others but by giving ourselves to them, thus reaching the point of self-renunciation but without ceasing to be ourselves, and, indeed, to be more and more ourselves to the extent that we decide to surrender ourselves.[20]

Concluding Remarks: From the Mediterranean to Europe and to the World

A theology from the Mediterranean can only be dialogical and dialoguing. This perspective surely stems from a particular context, rich for its adequate space of encounter from various shores; but it also has the potentiality to expand and to embrace all the places in which the Spirit blows, "wherever it pleases" (Jn 3:8). In short, theologising with the *tra* in our increasingly borderless world would help theologians in Europe and beyond, to rediscover and apply the four "fundamental criteria for a renewal and revival of the contribution of [theology] to a Church of missionary outreach," as outlined in Pope Francis' apostolic constitution *Veritatis gaudium* (2017): "Contemplation" of the mystery of salvation—this fosters "a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity"; "wide-ranging dialogue"; "inter-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches"; and finally, "networking" between theological institutions.[21] In today's world, the *auditus* and *intellectus fidei* need, more than ever, the *auditus* and *intellectus temporis et spatialis*.

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[20] Massimo Naro, "Portarsi dentro l'altro, portarsi l'altro dentro: Teologia del dialogo interreligioso," in *Ero forestiero e mi avete ospitato: Umanesimo e Migrazioni nel Mediterraneo*, ed. Massimo Naro (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2016), 115. My translation.

[21] See Francis, *Veritatis gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2017), no. 4, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20171208_veritatis-gaudium.html.

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THE CHURCH AS THE LIVING EMBODIMENT OF CHRIST IN A TROUBLED WORLD:

MISSION, LEGACY, AND RENEWED RELEVANCE

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Abstract

From its formative years, the Christian community functioned as a revolutionary force, challenging societal norms and redefining spiritual and ethical paradigms through bold testimony, a distinct way of life, and compassionate care for the sick, widows, orphans, and the marginalised. The Holy Eucharist has served as a source of spiritual sustenance, fostering virtues such as hope, patience, humility, and perseverance. Throughout history, the Church has played a fundamental role in shaping civilization, despite internal divisions within Christianity that have led to challenges and conflicts. Today, as reconciliation efforts unfold—such as interfaith dialogues and the World Council of Churches—the Church must address modern struggles. In a time of technological isolation, wars, hunger, and climate change, it must once again be a source of hope and healing. This chapter contends that the Church holds both the knowledge and resilience necessary to once again transform humanity, guiding it toward truth and salvation. With two millennia of accumulated wisdom and practice, the Church offers numerous avenues for Christians to manifest Christ's light in the contemporary world. By proclaiming His message of love and compassion, grounded in unwavering faith in the Triune God, the Church must reassert its transformative role. Now, more than ever, the Church stands poised to serve as a catalyst of renewal, healing, and salvation in the name of the Risen Christ.

Keywords: Church; mission; Eucharist; monasticism; digital media; re-evangelisation; ecclesiology; Christian witness.

Introduction

In a world plagued by moral ambiguity, spiritual detachment, and multifaceted crises, the Church stands at a historical intersection; the need to reaffirm her relevance is paramount. As the living embodiment of Christ on earth (Eph 1:22–23), she does not just bear the legacy of divine incarnation but also the enduring mission of transmitting Christ's love, hope, and salvation to all humanity.

The foundational moment of the Incarnation, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14), inaugurated a profound reconfiguration of human identity, community, and history. By entering the human condition, Christ sanctified all aspects of life, emphasising radical humility and sacrificial service. This theological reality laid the foundation for a culture centred on love and compassion instead of domination or exclusion, simultaneously elevating the value of personhood and offering inherent dignity to every human being.

The early Christians led a distinct communal life, characterized by mutual support, spiritual discipline, and their commitment to mercy and truth. The testimony of the martyrs, the formation of charitable institutions and the care offered to widows, orphans, and lepers, were not merely acts of kindness, but theological statements affirming the worth of every human being in the eyes of God.[1] Through her faith and praxis, the Church provided a compelling alternative to the prevailing cultural climate of individualism, cruelty and despair.

The Christian ethos did not fade into the past. Rather, it laid the foundation for an entire civilization, shaping what we now know as Western—and to a large extent global—culture. Yet, this growth has not been without trials. Periods of fragmentation and internal conflict leading to long-lasting divisions within Christianity have often undermined the Church's witness to the Truth of Christ's message.

Today, the rise of ecumenical efforts manifests the growing recognition of the need to transcend divisions, in order to respond effectively to the plethora of new challenges the Church needs to confront. Recent technological advances, while facilitating communication and knowledge-sharing, have contributed to increased isolation and existential disorientation. In a world undermined by socio-economic disparities and ongoing geopolitical unrest, that arguably has or seems by many to have lost its purpose, the Church must recover her authentic voice—a voice that speaks truth to power, and offers an alternative vision of human flourishing.

This is not an appeal to dogmatism or nostalgia, but rather a summons to spiritual authenticity—a reengagement with the foundational truths of the Gospel. At this critical juncture, the Church is called to bear witness with doctrinal coherence

[1] The astonishment this compassion aroused in Roman society is highlighted in the *Epistle to Diognetus*. See *Epistle to Diognetus*, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2, trans. Kirsopp Lake, Loeb Classical Library 25 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913), 348–79.

and theological clarity, recommitting to her mission principally through the following three avenues:

- Eucharistic Recapitulation;
- Authentic Monastic Engagement;
- Digital Discretion.

A systematic examination of these points now follows, proceeding from the least to the most significant.

Digital Discretion

Globalisation and digital media have transformed the landscape of missionary activity and re-evangelisation, offering unprecedented means for disseminating the Gospel across temporal, cultural and linguistic boundaries.

The opportunities afforded by globalisation and digital platforms are vast, yet not without peril. In recent years, reinforced by the COVID-19 restrictions and the impressive capabilities of AI, the digital environment has often been transformed into a mission field rather than a medium, fostering new forms of ecclesial presence and theological engagement. This was duly noted by Joseph Ratzinger, as Pope Benedict XVI, in his message for the 43rd World Communications Day. He saw the digital continent as "a significant environment for the Church," calling for "a digital presence that is articulate, respectful and compelling."[2]

The risk of trivialising theological content through the logic of virality, entertainment, or algorithmic manipulation should not be disregarded. Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras urges for digital expressions that reflect the dialogical and personal nature of true Christian witness.[3] To avoid superficiality and sensationalism, the Church's engagement in digital media requires structure, theological coherence and roots in ecclesial tradition.

With the entrance of AI in the technological arena, the digital landscape is further obscured. AI-generated religious materials, while perhaps efficient and wide-reaching, lack authenticity and discernment. Nikolaos Loudovikos warns against

[2] Benedict XVI, "Message for the 43rd World Communications Day" (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009), https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090124_43rd-world-communications-day.html.

[3] While Yannaras does not address digital culture directly, his insistence throughout *Postmodern Metaphysics* on the priority of relationality and reciprocity (see Thesis I–II) provides a theological framework for understanding authentic Christian witness in any medium—including the digital. Where digital expressions preserve the dialogical and personal mode of existence, they participate in the ecclesial life he describes; where they reduce witness to abstract information, they fall prey to the very virtualization he critiques. See Christos Yannaras, *Postmodern Metaphysics,* trans. Norman Russell (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2004), 83–170.

reducing theology to abstracted, decontextualised propositions, detached from ascetic experience and ecclesial embodiment.[4] Likewise, Hans Urs von Balthasar insists that theological communication must be guided by the "form" (*Gestalt*) of Christ, where beauty, truth and goodness, converge in a sacrificial mode of revelation. Consequently, any digital missionary strategy should resist the commodification of the sacred.[5] This is imperative if the Church is to preserve her authentic identity.

In conclusion, what is required is the cultivation of a digital presence characterised by sobriety and spiritual depth—one in which online engagement functions as a transparent extension of the liturgical, ascetic, and ecclesial life, rather than as a substitute for it or a mere spectacle.

Monastic Life

Modern science increasingly confirms what the Church has long known: that silence, stillness, fasting and community are therapeutic to both body and soul. The monastic rhythm of prayer, work, and contemplation can provide a powerful alternative to the frenzied pace of modern life, and an opportunity to rediscover the depth of one's own humanity. The monastery's significance is thus reinforced even to the secular layman.

From a Christian perspective, monastic life can serve as a profound realisation of the life *in Christ,* and a witness of the Church's missionary vocation. Rooted in the early Church's pursuit of committed discipleship, monasticism functions as a prophetic sign of the eschatological Kingdom, presenting a counter-cultural model of human existence, directed toward *theosis*. Maximus the Confessor articulates this clearly in his synthesis of ascetic and Eucharistic theology. There, monastic life is understood as the actualisation of the cosmic liturgy—humanity's calling to mediate creation's return to God, through love and self-emptying.[6] In this light, monasticism is not world-denying, but world-transfiguring; it presents a mode of being that speaks directly to the modern, fragmented and often self-estranged individual, tormented by existential despair.

The missionary significance of monasticism becomes especially apparent in the texts of Justin Popovich and Sophrony of Essex, who envision the monk as a bearer of divine-human communion to a disenchanted world. For Popovich, the monk represents, rather *is*, the "conscience of the Church," preserving and em-

[4] Nikolaos Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities: The Creation of the Christian Self: Beyond Spirituality and Mysticism in the Patristic Era*, vol. 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), 198–269, https://doi.org/10.1484/M.STT-EB.5.114468.

[5] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 463–526.

[6] Maximus the Confessor, "The Church's Mystagogy," in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. George C. Berthold (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 181–225.

bodying the fullness of Orthodox anthropology, in its most intense form: communion with the God-man Christ.[7] Similarly, Sophrony, building on the experiential theology of his elder, Silouan the Athonite, emphasizes the monk's existential intercession for the world, encapsulated in Silouan's dictum: "Keep your mind in hell and despair not."[8] This radical compassion and intercessory suffering become missionary acts par excellence, offering a witness that transcends apologetics and doctrine. In an age exasperated by psychological disintegration and nihilism, the monastic witness of personhood, humility and incessant prayer, constitutes a form of evangelization profoundly needed.

Modern Orthodox theologians, such as Nikolaos Loudovikos and Christos Yannaras, further underscore the monastic vocation's anthropological and ecclesial relevance in contemporary mission. Loudovikos interprets monastic life as the "ontological actualisation of communion," whereby the monk becomes a living icon of relational being, free from possessiveness and self-will.[9] Yannaras situates monasticism within the broader existential quest for authentic personhood, presenting it as a challenge to the Western reduction of the self to autonomous subjectivity.[10] Rev. Greg Peters affirms that the monastic charism offers the wider Church a witness of stability, fidelity and contemplative depth, necessary for renewing the Christian identity in post-Christian cultures.[11]

Drawing upon the thought of Luigi Gioia,[12] monasticism serves the contemporary Church not by withdrawing from the world but by embodying a prophetic

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[7] Popovich's assertion that "man is only a true man when he is completely united with God" grounds his anthropology in theanthropic communion. The monk, by pursuing this union through ascetic struggle, embodies Orthodox anthropology in its most intense form. As Popovich writes of the apostles—the prototype of all who follow Christ—they live "through the God-man, think through the God-man, feel through the God-man, act through the God-man" (from "The Apostolicity of the Church," in *The Orthodox Church and Ecumenism*). The monk thus functions as the "conscience of the Church," preserving and manifesting the fullness of theanthropic existence.
See Justin Popovich, *The Orthodox Church and Ecumenism,* trans. Benjamin Emmanuel Stanley (Birmingham, UK: Lazarica Press, 2000), 51–56. See also Justin Popovich, *Orthodox Faith and Life in Christ* (Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1994), 21–31.

[8] Archimandrite Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 1988), 155–70. See also St. Silouan the Athonite, *Wisdom from Mount Athos: The Writings of Staretz Silouan, 1866–1938*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 46.

[9] Nikolaos Loudovikos, *A Eucharistic Ontology: Maximus the Confessor's Eschatological Ontology of Being as Dialogical Reciprocity* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010), 167–75.

[10] Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, trans. Elizabeth Briere (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 136–60.

[11] Greg Peters, *The Story of Monasticism: Retrieving an Ancient Tradition for Contemporary Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 195–210.

[12] Luigi Gioia, *The Wisdom of St Benedict: Monastic Spirituality and the Life of the Church* (London: Canterbury Press, 2020), 93–106, 107–18.

witness to the primacy of God— a living reminder that authentic Christian existence is rooted in prayer, stability, and single-hearted devotion. In an age of fragmentation and distraction, the monastery offers the Church a school of attentiveness and spiritual depth, where the baptismal call to holiness is lived out with radical simplicity, thereby equipping the faithful to engage the world with discernment and contemplative hope.

In conclusion, monastic life—a "gift to the Church"—confronts the world with a transfigured vision of humanity which calls individuals and communities back to the heart of the Gospel (life *in Christ*). Monasticism responds to the existential crisis of the modern individual, by proclaiming a deeper truth: human beings are defined by their communion with God and with one another.

Eucharistic Recapitulation

The Holy Eucharist occupies a central place in Christian life. It is not merely a sacramental rite, but rather the ontological foundation of ecclesial existence and witness in the world. As Alexander Schmemann articulates, the Eucharist is not only an act of remembrance, but an epiphany of the Kingdom, "a journey … into the dimension of the Kingdom," a sacramental entrance into the risen life of Christ; a moment where the Church becomes truly herself, gathered in communion with Christ and one another, in thanksgiving (εὐχαριστία) to God.[13] In this way, the Eucharist transcends individual piety and situates believers in the communal, eschatological body of Christ. The Liturgy is recognised by Schmemann—who often advised against its reduction to mere formality—as the primary locus of theology, spirituality and mission.[14]

John Zizioulas furthers this by identifying the Eucharistic assembly with the locus where the Church realises her identity as communion (κοινωνία), underscoring the personal and relational dimensions of salvation that are inherently missionary.[15] For Zizioulas, Baptism transforms people into *ecclesial hypostases*, persons drawn into Trinitarian communion via the Eucharistic Body— ushering in true freedom and personhood. Therefore, the Eucharist is not an isolated ritual, but the constitutive act that forms and sends the Church into the world.[16]

[13] Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, 2nd ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 23–46.
[14] Alexander Schmemann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), 9–10. See also William C. Mills, *Church, World, and Kingdom: The Eucharistic Foundation of Alexander Schmemann's Pastoral Theology* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books / Liturgy Training Publications, 2012).
[15] John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 15–25.
[16] John D. Zizioulas, *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop During the First Three Centuries* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007).

In the missionary context, the Eucharist emerges as the paradigmatic act of re-evangelisation. Nikos Nisiotis and Nikolaos Loudovikos both stress the transformative anthropological implications of Eucharistic participation: shaped by Eucharistic love and kenotic offering, the faithful become witnesses to the divine-human communion, even though they are simultaneously emerged in a desacralised culture.[17] Loudovikos emphasizes the Eucharist's therapeutic potential against the existential alienation of contemporary society, insisting that mission is not primarily about dissemination of doctrine, but participation in and extension of the Eucharistic ethos: self-giving, communal, and eschatologically hopeful.[18] Re-evangelisation, then, is less about strategy and more about cultivating communities of Eucharistic authenticity that manifest Christ's love concretely.

Drawing from my pastoral experience in Greece, Ireland and the UK, I have repeatedly witnessed the transformative power of the Holy Eucharist in the lives of converts—an experience that has affirmed my conviction that the highest act of mercy I can offer to a soul in spiritual need is to lend my hands to the Lord in the preparation of His sacrifice.[19]

The integration of Eucharistic ecclesiology into missionary praxis finds robust support in Western theologians as well. Joseph Ratzinger sees the Eucharist as the "source and summit" of the Church's life, stressing that mission flows from the encounter with the crucified and risen Christ in the Eucharist, which compels believers toward proclamation and service.[20] Yves Congar and Hans Küng, though differing in ecclesiological emphasis, both recognize the Eucharist as a pivotal force for ecclesial renewal and unity, vital for authentic evangelization in pluralistic contexts.[21] The Eucharist reveals that God withholds nothing from humanity, that "the vertical relationship between God and his creature is perfected."[22] Re-grounding the Church in her Christological and Trinitarian origins, the Eucharist renews her capacity to bear witness, not by power or persuasion, but by an experiential expression of communion, sacrifice, and hope. In summary, the Church's calling to be the living embodiment of Christ in a troubled

[17] Nikos Nisiotis, "The Ecclesiology of the Eucharist and the Mission of the Church," *The Ecumenical Review* 23, no. 2 (1971): 147–59.
[18] Nikolaos Loudovikos, *A Eucharistic Ontology*, 112–28, 140–53.
[19] John Mason Neale and Richard Frederick Littledale, trans., *The Liturgies of SS. Mark, James, Clement, Chrysostom, and Basil, and the Church of Malabar*, 7th ed. (London: Griffith Farran & Co., 1870), 92–126.
[20] Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 78–89.
[21] Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church,* trans. Donald Attwater (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957), 243–51. See also Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967), 315–22.
[22] Brian Carpenter, "René Girard and the Eucharist as Eschatological Sacrifice," *Church Life Journal*, McGrath Institute for Church Life, University of Notre Dame, August 14, 2023, https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/rene-girard-and-the-eucharist-as-the-eschatological-sacrifice/.

world necessitates a bold re-imagining of its mission, rooted not in cultural accommodation, but in deep theological fidelity. Re-establishing the Eucharist at the core of the Christian life, enabling an authentic monastic engagement and offering a discreet digital presence (intentional, contemplative, and restrained), the Church can serve as a transformative agent in society, in a manner similar to the early Church.

This triune response—measured digital engagement, monastic authenticity, and liturgical vitality—positions the Church not as a relic of the past, but as a prophetic presence in the present. It is here, in the tension between tradition and contemporary challenge, that the Church bears faithful witness to the crucified and risen Christ, inviting the world into the mystery of divine life.

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CAN ONE STILL SPEAK OF A "JUST WAR" TODAY?

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN THEOLOGY, LAW AND PAPAL MAGISTERIUM WITH REGARD TO AN ETHICS OF PEACE AND CONFLICT

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Abstract

This chapter examines whether, in the light of historical developments in theology, international law, and the papal magisterium, it is still possible to speak meaningfully of a "just war" today. It traces the development of Christian reflection on war and peace from its foundations in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas through the medieval canonistic tradition and the contribution of Francisco de Vitoria, showing how theological reflection on the legitimacy and limits of warfare contributed to the emergence of ius gentium and, eventually, modern international law. The chapter then turns to the development of Catholic teaching on war and peace in the modern period, with particular attention to the papal magisterium from Benedict XV and the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II, Benedict XVI, Francis, and Leo XIV. Against this historical and theological background, it considers the increasing difficulties surrounding the traditional concept of the "just war" and examines contemporary challenges posed by international humanitarian law, asymmetric and hybrid warfare, terrorism, and new military technologies. The chapter concludes by asking whether the just-war tradition should be abandoned or whether its underlying concern for justice can continue to contribute to a contemporary ethics of peace and conflict.

Keywords: Just war; peace ethics; Augustine; Thomas Aquinas; ius gentium; international humanitarian law; papal magisterium; Pope Francis.

The Concepts of War and Peace Between History and Philosophical and Theological Reflection

War, as an inevitable human experience (because it is the exercise of the will to supremacy that is cyclically renewed and expressed in the dynamics between peoples), represents a cultural archetype of relations between human beings.[1] The interpretation of war has always been linked, first and foremost, to historical exegesis, followed by philosophical, anthropological, sociological, legal, ethical and, above all, religious interpretations.[2] The philosophical speculation of the twentieth century could not avoid questioning this war-peace dichotomy in an attempt to generate definitions and trace correlations between the two existing terms. In my home country Austria's constitution Professor Hans Kelsen importantly notes that the concept of peace is purely negative, as the state characterised by the absence of the use of force: "The absence of force in the *relationship among states*."[3] We could say that the legal concept of peace is that of a state of absence of the illegitimate use of force. In the system of international relations, the primacy of human rights stands as a guarantee of the maintenance of a supreme legal order, common to all states, and which stands as the true guarantee of peace.

The Church Between the Commandment of Love and the Realism of the Inevitability of Armed Conflict

In Matthew 26:52, we read: "All who take up the sword will die by the sword." Jesus commands his disciples not to use force either to assert the truth or to defend themselves against an unjust attack: "Put your sword back in its place, for all who take up the sword will perish by the sword." I would say that the principle of nonviolence, a corollary of the commandment of love, is what first comes to mind as a summary of Christ's ethical and political doctrine.[4] A good Christian has no choice but to respect and obey this principle. The Church of Rome, aware of its indispensable temporal dimension, has always intervened in the debate on the

[1] See B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, rev. ed. (London: Plume, 1967), cited in Beatrice Heuser, *Den Krieg denken: Die Entwicklung der Strategie seit der Antike* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2010), 418ff. See also Edward N. Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001).

[2] See Bernd Hüppauf, *Was ist Krieg? Zur Grundlegung einer Kulturgeschichte des Kriegs* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2013).

[3] Robert Schütt, "Kelsen, der Sicherheitspolitiker," *Wiener Zeitung*, November 2, 2022, https://www.wienerzeitung.at/h/hans-kelsen-der-sicherheitspolitiker.

[4] For the polemical context of Augustine's statements on war and peace, see, for example, Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Kein Ende der Gewalt? Friedensethik für eine globalisierte Welt* (Freiburg: Herder, 2018), 121ff. See also Pierluigi Consorti, *L'avventura senza ritorno. Pace e guerra tra diritto internazionale e magistero pontificio* (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2004), 153–65.

justifiability of war, albeit with different motivations.[5] It expresses its uncompromising doctrine on *caritas* as the supreme value of human existence, but with a wise realism that leads it to combine the rigidity of dogma with openness to ethical-rational justifications for war. In light of this premise, I believe it becomes less problematic to ascertain, and consequently accept, the coexistence of the pacifist inspiration intimately inspired by the commandment of love and the moral obligation to justify war, as *ius ad bellum* and *ius in bello*, which have always coexisted in the magisterium of the popes.[6]

Foundations of the Just War Theory in the Theology of Augustine and Thomas

Reflections on war have influenced canon law to some extent, and certainly those linked to the legacy received from the Greco-Roman world, which, for reasons of brevity, we do not intend to discuss here, but simply offer a few brief remarks to the thinking that underpin the theory of just war and which have their roots in Christian philosophical thought.[7] The formulation of a true doctrine on just war is mainly due to St. Augustine and St. Thomas. Augustine writes in *De civitate Dei* IV, 6: "Warfare is a happiness for the wicked, but a necessity for the good [...] and war against innocent peoples is unjust, whether it is waged out of a desire to harm, a thirst for power, to enlarge an empire, to obtain riches or to gain glory. In all these cases, war must be considered a great *latrocinium*."[8] And it is again in his Letter to Boniface that the Bishop of Hippo attempts to shake people out of their inertia in tackling the scourge of Donatist heresy, insisting on the justification of war linked to the ultimate goal of achieving peace: "*Non enim pax quaeritur ut bellum excitetur, sed bellum geritur ut pax acquiratur*."[9]

The other pillar on which the Catholic doctrine of just war rests is the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas.[10] In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas describes war in a

[5] See Matteo Nacci*, Origini, sviluppi e caratteri del jus publicum ecclesiasticum* (Rome: Lateran University Press, 2010).

[6] Natalino Ronzitti, *Diritto internazionale dei conflitti armati*, 7th ed. (Turin: Giappichelli, 2021), 19ff. See also Dieter Fleck, ed., *The Handbook of International Humanitarian Law*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[7] Frederick H. Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975; repr., London, 1979), 85: "To Master Gratian we owe the introduction of the concept of the just war into modern international jurisprudence. For centuries Gratian reigned as the foremost auctor in the jurisprudential speculation about war." For the theory of just war and its development, see Christoph Rhode, *Das Kreuz und der Krieg. Prämissen einer realistischen katholischen Friedensethik* (Nürnberg: Lepanto, 2021), 158ff.

[8] Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 4.6, in *Patrologia Latina* (PL), 41:117.

[9] "For peace is not sought in order to provoke war, but war is waged in order to obtain peace." Augustine, *Epistula ad Bonifacium*, in PL 33:6.

[10] See Gregory M. Reichberg, *Thomas Aquinas on War and Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

more analytical way, distinguishing it from other forms of conflict, such as brawls, sedition or schism, which do not possess the character of extraneousness of the acting subjects:

> Bellum proprie est contra extraneos et hostes, quasi multitudinis ad multitudinem; rixa autem est unius ad unum, vel paucorum ad paucos; seditio autem proprie est inter partes unius multitudinis inter se dissentientes, puta cum una pars civitatis excitatur in tumultum contra aliam. Et ideo seditio, quia habet speciale bonum cui opponitur, scilicet unitatem et pacem multitudinis, ideo est speciale peccatum.[11]

Aquinas unequivocally denounces the *contra legem divinam* nature of war, and therefore its nature as *peccatum*, before returning to Augustine's doctrine on just war and the conditions necessary for a conflict to be justified.[12] In this way, Aquinas's solution has a dual source: on the one hand, the theological source based on Augustine's interpretation of the Gospel, which does not entirely exclude the possibility of armed action, and on the other hand, the legal source, which places the justification of war *sub condicione*. The two views, Augustine's and Aquinas's, ultimately diverge slightly in their interpretation of the foundation of peace.

Ius commune and Just War

It is demonstrated how this doctrine has been, and still is, despite its natural historical evolution, always consistent with the cardinal points outlined in Justinian's *Corpus Iuris* and in Gratian's *Decretum*, and subsequently enriched by the glosses of decretists and decretalists.[13] Classical jurists attempted to theorise *sub specie iuris*[14] the concept of *bellum,* attributing its origin to both Roman and canon law, to the *ius gentium*. This is proposed, for example, in the *Institutiones* when describing what the *ius gentium* is:

[11] "War is properly directed against outsiders and enemies, as one community against another. A brawl, however, is between one person and another, or between a few persons and a few others. Sedition, on the other hand, is properly found among the factions of a single community when they are divided among themselves—for example, when one part of a city is stirred up into tumult against another. Therefore, because sedition has a particular good to which it is opposed, namely the unity and peace of the community, it is a distinct (or specific) sin." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (ST) II–II, q. 42, a. 1, *Corpus Thomisticum*, https://www.corpusthomisticum.org.

[12] Thomas Aquinas, ST II–II, q. 40, a. 1.

[13] See Piero Bellini, *Il gladio bellico. ll tema della guerra nella riflessione canonistica della età classica* (Torino: Giappichelli, 1989), 44–55.

[14] Bellini, *Il gladio bellico*, 44.

> Ius autem gentium omni humano generi commune est. Nam usu exigente et humanis necessitatibus gentes humanae quaedam sibi constituerunt: bella etenim orta sunt et captivitates secutae et servitutes, quae sunt iuri naturali contrariae. Iure enim naturali ab initio omnes homines liberi nascebantur.[15]

Therefore, war is an event attributable to that particular right which is common to the human race, and from it arise important consequences such as slavery, which, although not provided for in nature, because all humans are born free, is commonly accepted as a lesser evil in place of the death of the enemy in war. It was then the *Glossa* that defined the characteristics of war deriving from the *ius gentium*[16] and spoke of lawful war in the civil world, while just war was discussed in the canonical doctrine, where, in addition to the legal issue, the problem of the ethical basis of belligerent action arose. Similarly, therefore, canon law literature addresses the theme of war and the problem of its justification, and the conclusions reached by the science of canon law seem at that time to converge with those of civil law.[17]

In Causa 23 q. 2 c. 1, Gratian raises the question of what bellum iustum is: "*Quid sit iustum bellum. Iustum est bellum, quod ex edicto geritur de rebus repetendis, aut propulsandorum hominum causa*."[18] Subsequently, in c. 2, quoting Augustine, he states: "... *Iusta autem bella solent diffiniri que ulciscuntur iniurias*."[19] The nature of such wars is further described in c. 6 of C. 23, q. 2, in a passage that Gratian attributes to Augustine.[20] The emphasis returns to the peaceful intention of the belligerents, which extends to the justification of their actions. The text lists the characteristics that an act of war must possess: "*Apud veros Dei cultores etiam ipsa bella pacata sunt, qui non cupiditate aut crudelitate, sed pacis*

[15] "The law of nations (*ius gentium*) is common to the whole human race. For, prompted by practical necessity and the needs of human life, the nations established certain institutions for themselves. Thus wars arose, followed by captivity and slavery, which are contrary to the natural law. For by natural law, from the beginning, all human beings were born free." *Institutiones*, 1.2.2.

[16] Accursius, *Glossa* on *Digest* 1.1.5 (*ex hoc iure*), s.v. "bella.": "ergo ius gentium iniquum est cum iniquum inducat, sed dic quod dicit de bello licito, ut indicto a Populo romano vel Imperatore … item dicit de bello indicto ad iniuriam propulsandam, quod licet … non autem de alio ne inde iniuriae nascatur occasio."

[17] Joseph L. Kunz, "*Bellum Justum* and *Bellum Legale*," *American Journal of International Law* 45, no. 3 (1951): 530.

[18] "What a just war is. A war is just when it is waged under lawful authority, either to recover what has been wrongfully taken or to repel hostile attack."

[19] "Just wars are commonly defined as those that avenge wrongs that have been committed."

[20] Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages*, 73.

studio geruntur ut mali coherceantur, et boni subleventur."[21] Finally, on this subject, we should also mention Paucapalea, presumably Gratian's first pupil, in *Distinctio* 1, c. 9 of his *Summa al Decretum*: "*Bella, ut vim vi repellant*,"[22] which refers to the idea of self-defence as a justifiable cause for resorting to war, not only in the case of an individual who is offended, but also in the case of a community that receives an offence from outside, and which is thus recognised as having the right to defend itself lawfully by using force. From these brief premises, we can deduce that the doctrine of just war has its roots in the dual origins of Western legal science.

Modernity and the Theory of Just War

The conceptual paradigm that, in the context of medieval theology, had given rise to the theory of just war was challenged by a series of complex events that characterised the modern era: from the discovery of the New World to the spread of religious wars among the emerging nation states, culminating in the creation of international law, whose theological and legal roots are now emphasised by historiography.[23] Among the protagonists of the dialogue on war in the context of the "New World," the figure of Francisco de Vitoria stands out precisely because of the ample space he devoted to the theme of *bellum iustum* in his *Relectiones de Indiis*, in which the author uses the ancient language of scholasticism to find solutions to new problems posed essentially by the discovery of the new American continent and the events linked to its conquest.[24] The argument no longer revolves around the *ius divinum positivum*, which would establish the prerogatives of the pope, but rather is anchored in the *ius humanum*.[25] The *Magister Salmatinus* argues that the Emperor is not the *dominus totius orbis*, as the imperial theologians claimed, or that the pope does not possess the *plenitudo potestatis* in

[21] "Among the true worshippers of God, even wars themselves are peaceful, for they are waged not from greed or cruelty, but from a desire for peace, so that the wicked may be restrained and the good protected."

[22] "Wars are fought to repel force with force." *Summa di Paucapalea*, ed. Johann Friedrich von Schulte (Giessen: Emile Roth, 1890), 6.

[23] See Karl-Heinz Ziegler, *Völkerrechtsgeschichte* (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2007), 129–136. See also Sarah Mortimer, "Law, Justice and Charity in a Divided Christendom, 1500–1625," in *International Law and Religion: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Martti Koskenniemi, Monica Garcia-Salmones Rovira, and Paolo Amorosa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 25–42.

[24] Ziegler, *Völkerrechtsgeschichte*, 132.

[25] Piero Bellini, "Mare Hibericum. Canonical Considerations on the Alexandrian Division of the Atlantic Ocean," *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale* (December 2007), https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/statoechiese/article/view/963/1187. In particular, see the critical commentary on Vitoria at 25–58, on the role of Vitoria as the founding father of international law at 29, here 27.

temporal affairs,[26] thus denying not only the direct power of the pope to declare war on indigenous peoples, but even the very legitimacy of the pope to transfer such power to other earthly authorities, a *potestas* that does not belong to the successor of Peter. De Vitoria's effort was therefore twofold: on the one hand, to delegitimise the medieval theocratic and imperialistic system, and on the other, to create a new international legal order firmly based on the *ius gentium* and on the idea of a universal community.[27]

The International Political Community and the Just War

A subsequent reworking of the doctrine of just war coincided with the emergence of the *ius publicum europeum*, generated by the process of de-theologisation of law. The cornerstone of the new international order of the modern age[28] is the birth of the absolute and self-referential nation state, which acts as the guarantor of internal order, the creator of positive law that is an expression of the will of the sovereign. Therefore, peace and justice are no longer linked to medieval theological-philosophical categories.[29] The idea of state sovereignty that prevails in philosophical political dialogue also includes the justification of war: what is innovative is to consider one's enemy legitimate, with whom one shares rules. This is the terrain of the *ius in bello*, now stripped of all moral trappings and entrusted exclusively to the management of politics.[30]

The traditional theological-moral doctrine of just war is gradually modified in favour of the idea of the absolute illegitimacy of violent resolution of conflicts between states, except in cases of self-defence. This concept, central for centuries in the theory of *bellum iustum*, also becomes the focus of doctrinal elaborations of modern international law, finding its "codification" in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, which describes self-defence as a reaction *ad tempus* to an armed attack.[31] It is significant that Catholic doctrine sensitively intercepts this change

[26] Francisco de Vitoria*, Relectio de Indis*, 1.2.3 42: "Dato quod Imperator esset dominus totius mundi, non ideo posset occupare provincias barbarorum et constituere novos dominios et veteres deponere et vectigalia capere." And, speaking of the pope, he argues that "nullam potestatem temporalem habet in barbaros istos, neque in alios infideles," because the pope has temporal power only "*in ordinem ad spiritualia*," Vitoria*, Relectio de Indis*, 1.2.8, 51.

[27] See José Miguel Viejo-Ximénez, "*Totus orbis, qui aliquo modo est una republica* Francisco de Vitoria, el Derecho de Gentes y la expansión atlántica castellana," *Revista de Estudios Histórico-Jurídicos* 26 (2004): 359–91.

[28] See Armin von Bogdandy, Pedro Villalon Cruz, Peter Huber, *Handbuch Ius Publicum Europaeum,* vol. 1, *Grundzüge und Grundlagen staatlichen Verfassungsrechts* (Heidelberg: C. F. Müller, 2017).

[29] See Christian Hillgruber, "Die Souveränität der Staaten," *Der Staat*, 2014, 475–80.

[30] See Carl Schmitt, *Der Nomos der Erde im Völkerrecht des Jus Publicum Europaeum* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1950), esp. 161–267.

[31] See Yvonne Dorf, Elisabeth Rossa, *Völkerrecht*, 3. Auflage (München: C. H. Beck, 2024), 147–56.

and adapts to the new orientation with regard to the problem of the justification of war. This enlightened vision is expressed in some powerful passages of papal teaching, represented above all by John XXIII's *Pacem in terris*, and is linked to the openness of the Second Vatican Council towards fruitful dialogue with the contemporary world and its joys and anxieties, expressed in *Gaudium et spes*.[32]

The Development in the Papal Magisterium from Pope Pius XII to Paul VI

More or less until the Second World War, the Church followed the Thomist tradition, which justified conflict by confining it within the limits of legitimate defence, although there was a perceived need within the Church to clarify the criteria for justification. However, the events of Porta Pia in Rome 1870, the fall of the Papal States and the upheavals in the Holy See's legal position in the international arena prevented this type of reflection from taking root and transforming into a clear change in the Church's doctrine on the subject.[33] The need to re-establish its role in the Italian and international legal and political landscape, which culminated in the publication of the first code of Canon Law in 1917[34] and the signing of the Concordat of 1929,[35] engaged the Church in incessant diplomatic activity, which did not necessarily result in a clear stance against war, despite

[32] See Luciano Labanca*, Lo ius belli: dal Decretum di Graziano al diritto internazionale vigente Ricognizione e analisi delle fonti canoniche e internazionali*, (Milano: EDUCatt—Ente per il Diritto allo Studio Universitario dell' Università Cattolica, 2019), 349–83. The author focuses on the recent contributions of the popes and the Holy See to *ius belli*, following the line of the pontificates diachronically, from Benedict XV to Francis, highlighting how Catholic doctrine and the Holy See have played and continue to play an irreplaceable role in calling for peace and disarmament, as well as in the elaboration and development of international law, especially in its humanitarian dimension, not only through direct magisterial and diplomatic interventions in international forums, where it enjoys permanent member or observer status, but also through countless actions of conciliation and mediation in armed conflicts. See Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

[33] See Harald Tripp, "Der Staat der Vatikanstadt. Bausteine seiner Verfassungsgeschichte von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart," ed. Helmut Wohnout and Andreas Pacher, *Sapientia-Temperantia-Fortitudo-Iustitia. Festschrift für Wolfgang Johannes Bandion* (Wien: Böhlau, 2020), 360–86, at 373–75.

[34] Chiara Minelli, "Pio X e l'avvio del processo di codificazione," *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale* (October 2013): 1–38. See also Giuliano Brugnotto, "Il processo di formazione della prima codificazione canonica: Questioni di sistematica e tecnica legislativa," in *Sistematica e tecnica nelle codificazioni canoniche del XX secolo*, ed. Giuliano Brugnotto, Jürgen Jamin, and Sebastien Naonyr Somda (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2021), 3–13.

[35] Tripp, "Der Staat der Vatikanstadt," 376–79.

Benedict XV's definition of it in 1917 as "useless slaughter."[36] The Catholic Church's interest at that time was rather to assert the primacy of law over ethics and of the Holy See over states, with a view to reshaping the *potestas in temporalibus*.[37] Pius XII saw the international order as a bulwark against the drift towards war. He tried to establish a right to peace which, however, in order to be effective, required the contrasting legal regulation of the right to war itself. In any case, the law of war only intercepts its fundamental constitutive aspect, namely force, in order to regulate or suppress it.[38]

Then Pope John XXIII, no longer wishing to be the pope of silence and preparing for the fruitful dialogue of Vatican II, gave the world the encyclical *Pacem in terris* in 1963, which is still today a central document of papal doctrine on the themes of peace and war.[39] In retracing the course of history in *Pacem in terris* (PT), John XXIII seems to want to definitively sever, with a powerful statement, the link between war and rational justification, denying its function as an instrument of justice. "*Alienum est a ratione*" is the expression used in the encyclical (which is frankly untranslatable without losing the force of its meaning) to describe the idea of solving problems of justice by resorting to armed violence. Latin makes the pope's warning more incisive.[40]

The pontiff astutely notes in the text of the encyclical, which seems to want to develop a thought already anticipated in *Mater et magistra*,[41] that the contemporary era elaborates the concept of action directed towards the common good (PT 73), which seems to lay the foundations for the idea of humanitarian intervention that will develop only a few decades later under the pontificate of Karol

[36] Benedict XV, "Quarto ineunte bellorum anno: Ai Capi dei popoli belligeranti," August 1, 1917, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 9 (1917): 421–23.

[37] See Joseph Listl, *Kirche und Staat in der neueren katholischen Kirchenrechtswissenschaft* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1978), 179.

[38] See Robert Araujo, "The Holy See as International Person and Participant in International Law," in *From Just War to Modern Peace Ethics*, ed. Heinz-Gerhard Justenhoven and William A. Barbieri Jr. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 260.

[39] Harald Tripp, "Die bleibenden Werte der Enzyklika *Pacem in terris* als Fundament einer erneuerten internationalen Ordnung," *Ethica* (Vienna: Institut für Religion und Frieden, 2004): 105–15.

[40] John XXIII, *Pacem in terris* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1963), no. 67, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html. "Magis magisque nostris temporibus hominum animos persuasio pervasit, controversias, quae forte inter populos oriantur, non armis, sed pactis et conventis dirimendas esse. Persuasio haec, fatemur quidem, plerumque a terrifica delendi vi, quae cum hodiernis bellicis instrumentis coniuncta est, atque a timore calamitatum et horrendarum ruinarum, quas arma id genus ederent, initium ducit. Quare aetate hac nostra, quae vi atomica gloriatur, alienum est a ratione, bellum iam aptum esse ad violata iura sarcienda."

[41] John XXIII, *Mater et magistra* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1961), nos. 144, 148–56, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater.html.

Wojtyła.[42] The purpose of humanitarian action, which seems to replace the traditional concept of just war, becoming a historical development of it—almost as if the right of self-defence were assumed by the international community by virtue of a higher principle of solidarity—is now often the goal of military intervention.

To fully understand Pope Paul VI's position on the delicate issue of war, we must begin by recalling the role he played as a young collaborator of Pius XII but, above all, we must take into account the difficult political and social crisis that characterised the difficult years of his pontificate: the Cuban crisis, the horror of Vietnam, youth struggles, prominent political assassinations, years nevertheless blessed by the new light of the Council.[43] With eleven messages for the World Day of Peace, announced every January 1 from 1968 to 1978, Pope Montini is remembered as the pontiff of contemporary times who spoke openly and unequivocally about the impossibility of justifying war, although it was, in fact, his predecessor who, with an encyclical expressly dedicated to peace, definitively removed from Catholic doctrine any rational or theological basis for the concept of a just war.[44]

At the UN General Assembly, which celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 1965, Paul VI spoke on behalf of the Catholic Church and used, referring to himself, the unsurpassed expression "expert in humanity,"[45] which in *Populorum progressio* would instead be attributed to the whole Church.[46] In his reasoning, therefore, Montini completely dissociates the achievement of peace from the use of armed force: "True peace is founded on hearts; not on the victory of arms, not on political arrogance, not on ethnic pride, nor even on the balance of forces and interests; it is founded on love, it is founded on the fact that we are brothers."[47] Montini boldly declares the arms race—defined in *Gaudium et spes*, no. 81, as a "scourge of humanity"—to be inadmissible, as it creates only a fragile possibility of peace based on the perpetual threat of life. In this reading, there is no room for

[42] Heinz-Gerhard Justenhoven, "The Peace Ethics of Pope John Paul II," in *From Just War to Modern Peace Ethics*, ed. Heinz-Gerhard Justenhoven and William A. Barbieri Jr. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 313–44.

[43] For a historical-critical reconstruction of Montini's pontificate, see Carlo Cardia, "Paolo VI: Il più grande papa riformatore della modernità," *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale* 42 (2017): 1–45.

[44] Cardia, "Paolo VI," 19–23.

[45] See Paul VI, "Address to the United Nations" (October 4, 1965), https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651004_united-nations.html.

[46] See Paul VI, *Populorum progressio* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1967), https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html.

[47] Paul VI, "Announcement of the End of the Vietnam War" (January 24, 1973), https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/speeches/1973/january/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19730124_pace-vietnam.html.

any kind of justification, either for traditional war or for its more updated version of deterrence.[48]

The Peace Ethics of Pope John Paul II and the Ecology of Peace of Pope Benedict XVI

The pontificate of Pope John Paul II was marked by new wars, in particular the Bosnian conflict (1992–95), with its complex ethnic and religious implications, and the Gulf War (1990/91), which, behind ideological claims, concealed those of pure economic predation.[49] While starting from the assumption that war is legitimate only as a last resort (*ultima ratio*)—thus making a slight departure from the conciliar condemnation of total war—John Paul II entrusted the restoration of international order to the UN, so that the various conflicts between peoples might be resolved through collegiality and without bloodshed. There is no doubt in John Paul II's mind about the centrality of humanitarian law, which the pope sees as inspired by the Christian message. But John Paul II, who as a simple layman and then as a priest knew well the tragedy of world war, does not entirely exclude the possibility of resorting to the use of arms. With healthy realism, he warns that one cannot deny the massive presence of violence in human history and admonishes that the maintenance of the principle of self-defence is not incompatible with the fundamental concern for justice.[50] For the Polish pope, war, rather than being just or justifiable, is realistically unavoidable.[51]

Meeting with conscripts, John Paul II praised the very core of the military vocation because it is nothing other than the defence of good, of truth and, above all, of those who are unjustly attacked: "And here we find the principle that explains in what situation war can be justified: if it is a defence of the homeland under attack, a defence of those who are persecuted, innocent; a defence even at the risk of one's own life."[52] The military, whose humanitarian function is highly rehabilitated by this pope, are, in fact, for Wojtyła, who echoes *Gaudium et spes*, no. 79, "ministers of security and freedom of peoples," for "if they fulfil their duty correctly, they also truly contribute to the stability of peace." Even in a context of war, the military can bear witness to a solemn commitment to the defence

[48] See also *Gaudium et spes*, no. 81, which denounces the futility of resorting to deterrence in order to achieve true and lasting peace.

[49] See Ralph Rotte, *Die Außen- und Friedenspolitik des Heiligen Stuhls: Eine Einführung*, 2nd rev. ed. (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2014), esp. 295–326.

[50] See John Paul II, "Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace" (January 1, 2003), no. 4, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20021217_xxxvi-world-day-for-peace.html.

[51] See Rotte, *Die Außen- und Friedenspolitik des Heiligen Stuhls*, 123–28.

[52] John Paul II, "Address to the Conscripts of Cecchignola" (April 2, 1989), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1989/april/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19890402_militari-cecchignola.html.

of the fundamental values of freedom, order, understood as international normative order, justice and, ultimately, peace.

Following in the footsteps of his predecessors, Benedict XVI identifies the condition in which perfect justice can be achieved and, therefore, the integral development of the human person, that is, the "truth of peace," which cannot be reduced to the mere absence of conflict but rather to the Augustinian *tranquillitas ordinis*, which is "adherence to the transcendent order of things, as well as respect for that grammar of dialogue which is the universal moral law written in the heart of man."[53] It is, however, in *Caritas in veritate* that Pope Ratzinger returns more incisively to the peace-war dialectic, taking up an argument that had been constantly expressed before him by the papal magisterium, beginning with Pius XII, namely, the need for an international legal order that guarantees the application of justice animated by *caritas fide et ratione illuminata*, which is placed at the service of the common good.[54] The concerns expressed by the papal magisterium are exclusively concerned with the building of a human ecology of peace.[55] This means that any evolution of the papal magisterium on these delicate issues must be based on the relentless promotion of human rights, but must essentially stem from a concrete policy of disarmament capable of reducing the global level of military spending suffered by the weakest populations, who are too often deprived of the living conditions that human dignity itself requires.

Pope Francis and the Denial of any Justification of a Just War and Pope Leo XIV's Peace Appeals

In his encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (FT) from October 2020, Pope Francis reiterates that the world is in a "third world war piecemeal" (*guerra mondiale a pezzi*).[56] This "third world war in pieces" threatens to tear the world apart. For Pope Francis, Pope John XXIII reframed the relationship between ends and means in the doctrine of war, paving the way for the understanding that under these conditions

[53] Benedict XVI, "Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace" (January 1, 2006), no. 4, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20051213_xxxix-world-day-peace.html.

[54] See Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009), no. 6, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html.

[55] Clemens Breuer, "Die Ökologie des Menschen: Die Rede von Papst Benedikt XVI. vor dem Bundestag," in *Neue Ansage des Glaubens: Papst Benedikt XVI. und das Projekt der Neuevangelisierung*, ed. Josef Kreiml (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2012), 114–49.

[56] Francis, *Fratelli tutti* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), no. 25, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html. See also Virgilio Ilari, "La 'terza guerra mondiale a pezzi,'" *Limes* 2 (2016): 69–74.

of destruction, the practice of war is ultimately absurd (see PT 126–129).[57] Pope Francis takes up this argument and deepens and radicalises it: The irrationality of war is obvious for Francis in the face of the arguments for peace. In other words, "the risks [of war] will probably always outweigh the hypothetical benefits attributed to it" (FT 258). In the face of nuclear terror, the pope also rejects attempts to intimidate others through fear. In this context, Pope Francis seriously questions the traditional doctrine of the "just war." According to the pope, the necessary requirements in the doctrine of "just war" cannot be met in the present to justify a war. For this reason, "it is very difficult today to rely on the rational criteria developed in past centuries," and "that is why we can no longer consider war as a solution." It is very striking that the pope even openly distances himself from Augustine in the corresponding footnote, "who developed a theory of just war that we no longer advocate today" (FT 258, fn. 242). Pope Francis does not definitively condemn the doctrine of "just war" but he leaves no room for its application under current military and political conditions. On the contrary, he considers the pacifist stance of resistance to wars, military threats and a supposed armed security to be more rational and efficient, even if it means "being considered naive because we choose peace."

In the Angelus prayer of July 20, 2025, newly elected Pope Leo XIV recalled the Israeli army's attack on the Catholic parish of the Holy Family in Gaza.[58] Three Christians died in the raid, and the pope remembered them by name because behind every victim there is a story that must not be forgotten. "I am particularly close to their families and to all the parishioners," said Leo XIV. This act, unfortunately, adds to the ongoing military attacks against the civilian population and places of worship in Gaza: "I appeal to the international community to observe humanitarian law and respect the obligation to protect civilians, as well as the prohibition of collective punishment, indiscriminate use of force and forced displacement of the population."

Final Remarks and Recent Challenges

In conclusion, I try to mention some recent challenges for ethics, theology and law sciences in questions on war and peace: In the face of dramatic situations, it is essential for the international community to take responsibility and run the risk of making mistakes in order to achieve the best possible outcome, rather than retreating behind an immovable pacifism. Even the Church, in its capacity as a

[57] Stefan Silber, "Nie wieder Krieg! *Fratelli tutti*, Frieden und die Abschaffung des 'gerechten Kriegs,'" in *Papst Franziskus: Mensch des Friedens. Zum friedenstheologischen Profil des aktuellen Pontifikats*, ed. Stefanie A. Wahl, Stefan Silber, and Thomas Nauerth (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2022), 173–77.

[58] See Leo XIV, "Angelus," Piazza della Libertà, Castel Gandolfo (July 20, 2025), https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/angelus/2025/documents/20250720-angelus.html.

societas, is constantly torn between its natural propensity for peace and a public role that requires it to engage in dialogue with the temporal reality.[59] The only certainty that runs through history and reaches us today is the deepening of theological reflection and of the Church's Magisterium on the issue of war: "Peace is nothing more than the unquestionable victory of right and, in the end, the joyful celebration of life."[60]

Since the Geneva Conventions, which celebrated their 75th anniversary in 2024, international humanitarian law has undergone significant developments. Originally designed for inter-state armed conflicts, it is now increasingly being applied to non-international conflicts.[61] "There is just war, the war of defense, but today with the weapons that are available, this concept becomes very difficult," Cardinal Parolin stated in an interview in July 2024.[62] "In fact, it's being discussed. I don't think there is a definitive position yet, but it's a concept that's in revision." In terms of the current war in Gaza, sparked after Israel retaliated for an Oct 7, 2023, surprise attack by Hamas that killed 1,200 people and which so far has claimed over 30,000 Palestinian lives, Parolin said: "It's never a just war, in this sense."

Nevertheless, modern warfare, unresolved questions regarding new technologies, non-compliance with the law as a tactic of war, and obstacles to its enforceability pose significant challenges to the law[63]:

1. Quantitative and qualitative developments in warfare. The nature of conflict has changed dramatically over time. Recent conflicts, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, show a combination of massive artillery attacks (causing high losses among combatants but also among the civilian population) and the use of high-precision weapons systems, which is increasing immensely.[64] Particularly problematic here is that the use of modern weapons systems in asymmetric conflicts creates new imbalances and deepens existing ones.

[59] See Bellini, *Il gladio bellico*, 22–23. The author continues to warn of the dangers of subjectivising judgements on war, which leads to relativisation aimed solely at blurring the distinction between what is lawful and what is not.

[60] See Paul VI, "Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace" (January 1, 1977), https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_p-vi_mes_19761208_x-world-day-for-peace.html

[61] See Carlo Masala, *Warum die Welt keinen Frieden findet*, 2nd ed. (Vienna: Christian Brandstätter Verlag, 2024), 105–7.

[62] See Elise Ann Allen, "Top Vatican Diplomat Says Modern Conflicts Don't Qualify as 'Just War,'" *Crux*, July 4, 2024, https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2024/07/top-vatican-diplomat-says-modern-conflicts-dont-qualify-as-just-war.

[63] Masala, *Warum die Welt keinen Frieden findet*, 104.

[64] See Marco Sassòli, *International Humanitarian Law: Rules, Controversies, and Solutions to Problems Arising in Warfare* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), 72.

2. New technologies and cyber warfare. As already briefly mentioned, new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI)[65] and autonomous weapons systems, but also the constantly evolving capabilities in the field of cyber warfare,[66] pose new challenges for international humanitarian law. Similar to precision weapons, these technologies have the potential to largely avoid collateral damage and possibly even make armed conflicts more "humane."

3. Systematic non-compliance as a tactic of war. One worrying phenomenon is the targeted violation of fundamental principles of international humanitarian law, for example the use of civilians as human shields,[67] attacks on hospitals,[68] or humanitarian convoys.[69] Systematic non-compliance with the law is often used strategically to deliberately sow doubt about the legitimacy and effectiveness of international humanitarian law. Reports show that the violations are often deliberately staged to achieve political goals or to delegitimise opponents.

4. The question of the legal accountability of armed non-state actors (Hisbollah, Daesh, Hamas): Since the jurisdiction of the ICC is complementary to that of national courts, the latter remain primarily responsible for conducting investigations and prosecutions for core international crimes. In another publication, I was able to show that there is no standardised procedure expressly prescribed by law for holding actors accountable and bringing them to justice.[70] Therefore, the current international justice system clearly lacks the means to enforce the application of international humanitarian law to non-state hybrid actors.

Reality changes and brings with it new dangers for humanity. But the problem remains open and in search of comprehensive answers from theology, law and political science: How do we recognise what is right? How can we distinguish between good and evil, between true law and apparent law? Can one still speak of a "just war" today? Today, a "just war" is as we have seen highly controversial from a theological point of view. Although Christian tradition has long held that war can be morally permissible under strict conditions (e.g. in self-defence), the theology of peace places greater emphasis on Jesus' message of non-violence,

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[65] See Elke Schwarz, "Cybernetics at War: Military Artificial Intelligence, Weapon Systems, and the De-Skilled Moral Agent," in *Routledge Handbook of the Future of Warfare*, ed. Artur Gruszczak and Sebastian Kaempf (London: Routledge, 2023), 297–307, at 297.

[66] See Sassòli, *International Humanitarian Law-Rules*, 532.

[67] In violation of Article 51(7) 1. Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions and Rule 97 of the ICRC Customary Law Study, available at https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl.

[68] In violation of Article 19 of GC I, Article 18 of GC IV, Article 12 1. Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions, and Rule 28 of the ICRC Customary Law Study, available at https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customaryihl.

[69] In violation of Article 59 of GC IV, Articles 70(4) and 71(2) of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, and Rules 31 and 32 of the ICRC Customary Law Study, available at https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl.

[70] See Harald Tripp, *Everyone's accountable: Hisbollah und Daesch als hybride Akteure im Nahen Osten. Die Herausforderungen für das Humanitäre Völkerrecht und die EU-Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik,* October 2022 (unpublished master's thesis).

love for one's enemies and reconciliation. In view of modern destructive power, war contradicts the Christian mandate for peace. That is why many theologians today no longer emphasise "just war," but rather the establishment of a "just peace"—through justice, human rights, dialogue through diplomacy and prevention. The Solomonic question remains in theology the decisive issue facing politicians and politics today,[71] as well as today's civil jurists, who, unlike those of the past, having renounced the certainty of subordination to *ius divinum*, lose the comforting awareness of being the custodians of a science that "is ennobled by reflecting on the sacredness of its object,"[72] namely justice.

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[71] Benedict XVI, Address to the Reichstag of Berlin, 22 September 2011, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/it/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reichstag-berlin.html. See also Massimo Del Pozzo*, Il Magistero di Benedetto XVI ai giuristi*, (Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), 51.

[72] See Orazio Condorelli, "Carità e diritto agli albori della scienza giuridica medieval," in *Diritto canonico e servizio della carità,* ed. Jesús Miñambres (Milano: Anthea, 2008), 41–104, at 97.

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