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THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH IN A CHANGING CULTURAL AND SOCIAL SETTING

INTRODUCTION

No doubt the contemporary setting in which the Church carries out her teaching has changed dramatically over the last three decades spanning the turn of the 20th century. Certainly, the end of the pontificate of St John Paul II was a turning point. The passing away and burial of John Paul II were an opportunity to pay tribute to the deceased pope, teacher, Christian, and prominent politician. Even as many as four million people arrived in Rome to honour the departed pope, let alone millions following the burial ceremony via the mass-media. The funeral was attended by 70 presidents of various countries, including the President of the United States, four kings and five queens [Maciejowski 2008, 12-15]. The event was also a display of the great strength of the Roman Catholic Church, her teaching, impact, and global position.

How come that not even 18 years have passed since that day and so much has changed in the world-Christianity relations? Not so long ago the most Catholic country in Europe, Ireland has become a secular or even extremely atheistic state over a couple of years. Similar trends can be observed in Poland, although the processes of secularization and atheization are making slower progress. Moreover, attempts to counter pedophilia

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made in many countries but only targeted at members of the Roman Catholic Church leave the general public with an impression that the Church is anything but a criminal organization. The question that arises is: What is the future of the Roman Catholic Church, Christianity, and the message of the Gospel?

1. THE DRIVERS OF CHANGE

A number of reasons behind changes in the cultural context of the Roman Catholic Church can be named. They fall within the categories of exogenous and endogenous transitions. First, the endogenous reasons will be discussed. From the early Middle Ages to the end of the 20th century, the world was roughly divided into the Christian and Muslim spheres. Religion was an instrument of cultural identity, giving believers a sense of safety and a meaning of life. Temples were not only places of worship but also hosted organ concerts, painting exhibitions, social gatherings, and would often provide shelter [Wąsowicz 2012, 177-94]. And we are not talking about mediaeval times only. During the martial law in Poland (1981-1983), temples were literally bursting at the seams with the faithful. Many of today's critics of the Roman Catholic Church would seek shelter and support in temples in the 1980s. However, for many of them, faith in God or the teaching of the Church ultimately proved of secondary importance.

Globalization has brought an end to the division of the world into Christian and Muslim. In pursuit of economic development, cultural and religious boundaries have been removed. Not only have the differences between Christians or Muslims been blurred, the same has happened to other cultures and religions. Economic development and direct and indirect investment cause cultural or religious matters to recede into the background. An example of this trend is the Spanish football club Real Madrid. The club's official crest included the royal crown with the centrally placed Christian cross. In 2014 the club negotiated a sponsorship contract with the National Bank of Abu Dhabi. In order to close the deal, the club decided to remove the cross from the crest. The main symbol of Christianity had to simply give way to club's financial goals [Syamsi 2017, 347-52].

Next to globalization, ICT tools have largely shaped the cultural, social, political, and economic trends for at least two decades now. They contribute to the rise of a new information society, its members communicating mainly via the Internet [Sitek 2022, 649-58]. The Internet has become a basic living and working space for individuals from different cultures and backgrounds. A new digital society operating in cyberspace is emerging before our very eyes. It is challenging the existing social systems. For a digital society, the history of the individual, social groups and where they come from is becoming less and less relevant. Culture, national affiliation, and religion as we know them are losing value [Antczak 2017, 147-60]. The United States of America have developed a model digital society. The country's residents are nationalities and ethnic groups from all over the world. They have created a new, multicultural society using high-end technologies. No wonder the U.S.A. is home to the leading companies designing and manufacturing new ICT solutions and devices. World's largest databases, the so-called big data, are also kept there. American companies are also the major developers of artificial intelligence.

There are also endogenous or internal causes of the crisis of Christianity. It manifests itself, but not only, in the relegating religion to the margins of public life. For the last 1000 years or so, the Church was convinced not only of her religious strength but, above all, of her political leverage. The phrase, *Roma locuta, causa finita*, "Rome has spoken, the matter is over," was for long regarded as valid and conclusive. For centuries, Christianity would also serve as an ideology consolidating Europe before the consecutive storms of Islam. In many countries, religion, especially Catholicism, was identified with the nation. This concept has largely survived in Poland to date. Still, many believers, politicians, but also priests and bishops claim that Poland is the mainstay of Christianity in Europe [Mazurkiewicz 2002, 259-72]. Meanwhile, we have been witnessing an alarming outflow of the faithful from the Church also in Poland. Due to insufficient funds, it is becoming increasingly challenging to maintain temples or ecclesiastical museums in good shape, or to undertake charitable initiatives. More and more members of the clergy, but also laity working for the Church, devote too much effort and time to defending the temporal goods of the Church, which are, however, considered symbols of the past.

That the Church is not keeping up with the civilizational change, including technological developments in the modern world, is no longer debatable. We do not know how to speak to contemporary people. This can be seen in preaching, public statements of the members of Catholic laity and, above all, in the education of priests and lay individuals active in the Church. This void caused by the Church's inability to respond to the transformation in the global and digitized world has been filled by various new theories and concepts of social organization, which are far from the core of Christianity [Sitek 2017, 131-46].

For at least two decades, various influencers, fortune tellers, or even scandal-makers have been telling people where the truth is, their only "competence" being the number of views or clicks on their online profile. They are considered the modern "prophets" of the younger generation. That is why their words are treated as a revealed truth. Journalists and politicians play a similar role [Gaik 2019, 33-42].

What typifies this contemporary message is that the target audiences seem not to reflect on its authenticity and credibility. By no means is this message confronted with the "prophets'" personal lives, educational background, or knowledge gained from a reliable source. In the period of real communism, there was a commonly shared view that the mass-media content should be approached critically and with a pinch of salt. Unfortunately, many years later, despite the unprecedented level of access to schooling, the level of critical thinking in society still leaves much to be desired [Sitek 2018, 13-24].

2. THE FUTURE AND VALUE OF THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH IN A GLOBAL AND DIGITAL SOCIETY

The social, political, economic and cultural changes briefly outlined above and taking place in the modern world for several decades must pose a question about the value and role of the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Many optimistic but also critical and even downhearted views can be found in the public domain. What is the value of the Roman Catholic Church's teaching for the modern, global, and digitalized member of the society operating substantially in cyberspace? This question is of paramount importance, especially for the young generation of 20-, 30- and 40-

year-olds. Older generations will probably remain loyal to the values that they were taught as young people, i.e. at school or at home. But the same cannot be said about the young generation. School has largely become an ideological battleground, and the family has undergone a profound transformation. To say that the contemporary family is more of an economic and hospitality institution would not be an exaggeration [Jakimiec 2019, 289-310]. Education of children and youth is taking place in the realm of social media, commerce (aggressive advertising remodelling the system of values with a view to increasing the sales of goods and services, e.g. “spend Easter in our hotel” or in another attractive place) or politics.

In an attempt to address the question posed above, we must recall the fundamental mandate contained in the Gospel of Matthew (28:19-20), “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

It is worth noting that the mission entrusted to the Apostles was not designed for any particular nation: Jews, Poles, Germans, or Italians. It was intended for “all nations.” Christ’s words were uttered in a specific place and at a specific time. It goes back to the period of the reign of Emperor Octavian. It was the heyday of the Roman Empire. The empire was inhabited by peoples representing dozens or even hundreds of different nationalities, cultures, and religions: Romans, Greeks, Gauls, Germanic people, and many others. Christ spoke these words in Palestine, and the audience were Jews, but certainly all the people of the time living in that world were on His mind. For those people, the whole world was confined to the limits of the mighty Roman Empire. The first person to understand Christ’s message was St Paul. He was a Jew, but also a Greek and a Roman. He was a regular representative of the multicultural world of that time. He managed to convince the Apostles during the so-called Council of Jerusalem to spread the Gospel among all nations without exception.

How does this mission entrusted to the Apostles by Christ refer to modern times? The Gospel must be proclaimed today as it was back then. It remains the principal and timeless component of the Church’s teaching spread to all peoples. Given that, religion cannot have a national character. In point of fact, to link Christianity to a nation, politics, or political ideology is a mistake and leads to the denial of Christianity as such. Dur-

ing World War II, German soldiers wore belts with a sign saying, *Gott mit uns* – God with us. Given the scale of crimes committed by Nazi Germany, the question is what god they invoked. Certainly not for the Real and Only God. Moreover, can a war between Christians be justified? Basically, the Germans waged war against other Christian nations. Assuming that religion is coupled with a nation, would it be legitimate to say that today's Russo-Ukrainian war is being fought between Christians? How can this be reconciled with the missionary mandate of Christ? Well, it cannot. The Russo-Ukrainian war, but also the ones in Syria, Somalia, Nigeria, Chad, and in many other places in the world, is a denial of Christianity and, above all, of the Gospel.

In the global and digitized world, a new society is being forged, a digital society overstepping geographical, political, cultural or even historical boundaries. Today again, no longer at the Sea of Galilee but here and now, Christ calls all of us to preach the Gospel to the world, both real and, perhaps primarily, virtual. John Paul II also insisted on re-evangelizing Europe and even the world [Banaszak 2022, 45-62; Przysucha 2017, 235-47]. The pope, like Christ, did not mean any specific nation. Only evangelization addressed to all people, regardless of nationality, race, or sex, makes sense and can be effective and useful in the contemporary world as it was in the Roman Empire.

So, how should evangelization or teaching be carried out by the Roman Catholic Church? As it was during the early Church, when the Apostles travelled the world, even reaching India, also today, priests, bishops or the pope, but also, and perhaps above all, the laity must become missionaries of the Good News.

What methods should be put in place? The first and simplest of them is *Verba docent, exempla trahunt*. Words teach, examples lead. In other words, as St James says in James 2:26, "For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, even so faith apart from works is dead." The personal lives of the first Christians were exemplary and encouraged others to believe in Christ. The testimony of personal life has always been regarded as the most effective and authentic embodiment of the Gospel truths.

Yet, the example of personal life does not suffice. Early Christians already took advantage of the most recent technique and technology of communication. The letters of St Paul testify to this. They were written according to the most advanced technique and with the use of all available

figures of speech. In this way, the author was able to reach not only simple folk but also the social elite of the time. Many Fathers of the Church and Christian writers, such as Tertullian, St Irenaeus, St Origen, or St Augustine, followed into St Paul's footsteps. Today, to proclaim the Gospel and engage in ecclesiastical teaching, it is necessary to employ the latest technologies, i.e. social media. Not only must Christians be present there, but they should be exceptionally active. Cyberspace can as well be home to new Christian groups or communities in communion with the hierarchical Church and with the pope [Glaeser 2020, 41-64; Szyłkowska 2016, 175-94]. Perhaps, the future will see the development of new Church structures adapted to digital society. Today, it is too early to predict that.

However, the most important thing is to adapt the culture of preaching of the Gospel to the modern people living mainly in cyberspace. Perhaps, these people will not come to a church or parish existing in the real world. There are many missionaries already out there in cyberspace. Their patron is Blessed Carlo Acutis from Italy. Today, the phenomenon of e-ministry should no longer come as a surprise [Kuczwał 2010, 70-95]. Yet, e-missionaries are not too numerous. What is more, the people of the Roman Catholic Church seem not to acknowledge this new way and the need of change.

Catholic universities, also in Poland, should already adopt appropriate terminology and ways of communicating the Gospel via cyberspace to people in distant locations. New curricula and university programmes should be designed to show young people how to use ICT, new computer programs, or social media for evangelization.

These initiatives must not be implemented aside from the existing structure of the Church, including the hierarchical Church, founded by Christ. Without this unity, the teaching will sooner or later get distorted and lose meaning.

CONCLUSIONS

The teaching of the Roman Catholic Church is primarily rested upon the teaching of Jesus Christ and written down in the Gospel. The fundamental message of this teaching is the truth about human salvation and, consequently, eternal life. In 1 Corinthians 15:14, St Paul says, "And if

Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” This truth of resurrection and eternal life was at the core of the last instruction that Christ left the Apostles before the Ascension, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt 28:19-20).

Right upon undertaking this mission, Christ’s followers employed various literary forms and technical innovations to make it effective. The content, form, and wording were adapted to the changing social, cultural, political, and even scientific reality. The flexibility of the forms of communication was one of the tools to spread the Gospel quickly and effectively throughout the known world, i.e. the Roman Empire. Such an approach to the preaching of the Gospel was also at work in later periods.

For almost a century, the world has been subjected to the processes of globalization. Established political and cultural boundaries are being gradually lifted; a global society is emerging. For five decades, this transformation has been running hand in hand with computerization and digitization due to the development of ICT tools. As a result, information society has been created. What typifies this society is the transfer of many of its activities to the so-called cyberspace. What follows, people communicate mainly via social media.

This civilization-wide change requires that the existing forms of evangelization be reconsidered and employ the latest technological achievements. But not only. It is also necessary to introduce a new language and new forms of communication between the faithful, who do not always choose to come to a physical church. Instead, they would rather meet in virtual reality. However, it is necessary to adapt the Gospel message to the mindset of the contemporaries who operate in information society. Still, the core of this message, the law of the resurrection of Christ and eternal life, remains unchanged.

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Abstract

The subject of this paper is to demonstrate the connection between the forms of preaching the Gospel in the context of today's cultural, social, and political changes. Since the early days of Christianity, the Gospel message has been adapted to the changing environment. Currently, globalization and digitization are behind these

changes. Information society is emerging, its main activities, including communication, being transferred to cyberspace. For this reason, actions aimed at adapting contemporary evangelical communication to this new situation need to be identified. There is a need for change in language and terminology. It is also necessary to utilize the latest IT solutions for evangelization. They should primarily operate in virtual reality, in which a significant number of people are already active. By doing so, it will be possible to follow Christ's instruction to proclaim the Good News to all nations.

Keywords: Resurrection; cultural environment; Church; information society; new technologies

Nauczanie Kościoła w zmiennym otoczeniu kulturowo-społecznym

Abstrakt

Przedmiotem opracowania jest wykazanie powiązania form głoszenia przekazu ewangelicznego w kontekście zachodzących zmian kulturowych, społecznych i politycznych. Już w samych początkach chrześcijaństwa przekaz ewangeliczny był dostosowywany do zmieniającego się otoczenia. Współcześnie procesami powodującymi te zmiany to globalizacja i cyfryzacja. Powstaje społeczeństwo informacyjne, które główne swoje aktywności, w tym komunikowanie się, przenosi do cyberprzestrzeni. Z tego też powodu należy podać działania zmierzające do dostawiania współczesnego przekazu ewangelicznego do nowej sytuacji. Potrzeba jest zmiany języka i terminologii. Konieczne jest też wykorzystanie najnowszych urządzeń IT do ewangelizacji, która swoją główną aktywność winna przenieść do wirtualnej rzeczywistości, w której funkcjonuje już większa część ludzkości. Wówczas będzie możliwa realizacja Chrystusowego przesłania o potrzebie głoszenia Dobrej Nowiny wszystkim narodom.

Słowa kluczowe: Zmartwychwstanie; otoczenie kulturowe; Kościół; społeczeństwo informacyjne; nowe technologie

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