

Proposals of Evangelization for Parishes in Slovakia

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Until not long ago, the parish was the main site for the institutional identification where Christian life in its members was developed with all its riches. In the last decades due to the many reforms in society the image of the parish so far and the style of its pastoral care has found itself in a state of criticism and rejection. In the article we are searching for the answer to the question on how to renew our parishes for them to be able to answer the religious needs of the people in the new situation of a pluralistic society and in a situation of additional social reforms, which force the Church to take a responsible attitude. We offer three models of renewal of Christian life in parishes which have come from the impulse of the ecclesiology of the Vatican Council II in some European countries and are very successful. The conclusion of the article is formed by a reflection on aging and renewal of society as a sociological reality. *Keywords:* Vatican Council II, society, laymen in the Church, catechumenate, movement, pastoral care, evangelization

Introduction

In the history of the Church the parish was – and still is – the main site for the institutional church identity, where is developed. This historical fact is proven by experience. In the last decades, however, the parish as an institution has not avoided criticism. Many have asked, whether the parish, in the manner we know it, are still able to perform the tasks that are awaited from them by the Church and the world.

The following reflections are expressions of hope, that parishes in Slovakia can become true bases of a rich Christian life. We shall try to introduce the parish with the characters, which are highlighted by the Vatican Council II in its teachings about the Church. We will demonstrate three models of pastoral care practices and bring a short reflection on growing old and the

reintegration of the community. May these observations serve for reflection and discussion.

1. Historical context

The region of Slovakia has a solid ecclesiastical structure, expressed by the borders of dioceses and parishes. The close connection of the influence and collaboration of the Church and the monarchy just a few centuries ago led to the formation of a dense net of territorial units – parishes, in which the parish priest was also the actor in sociopolitical matters. This way parishes became the traditional site for religious life and all who were born there became “by the will of fate” Christians.¹

Nobody in the parish has to be the missionary or evangelizator because all who lived in the parish were automatically the members of the parish and engaged in the common process of religious life.

The task of pastoral care was only to spiritually deepen and subordinate the everyday life of the parishes as well as culturally conditioned events to the gospel.

While religious life passed centuries in agreement with the civil and state society and so declaring oneself to be an active Christian was an honor and the opposite was received with resentment and suspicion, this peace was radically disrupted by the formation of communism in 1948. The Church was plunged into persecution. Seminars, religious orders, magazines, publishers, societies and fraternities were canceled. About three hundred priests were put into internment and the state penalized all efforts of religious activity. Two generations were swept into atheisation.²

Already the traditional pre-communist parish was characterized by the absence of laymen in the parish structure, although different associations provided housing. However, the second half of the 20th century was characterized by a strong restriction of laymen in parish activities and the entire weight of the parish was on the shoulders of the priest. Associations, fraternities and communities were forbidden, so priests and believing laymen narrowed their view on an actively functional parish, on the participation in the worship and the receiving of sacraments behind church walls. Even the providing of sacraments was done without thorough catechization. This heritage accompanies and influences not only laymen, but priests too.³

Thank God in the same time as the godless ideology suppressed the development of parish life, the Vatican Council II was held, which stimulated

1 Cf. ZULEHNER, Paul M., NEUNER, Peter: *Cirkev v dnešnom svete : Potreba alebo prežitok*. Bratislava : Kalligram, 2013, p. 195.

2 Cf. KYSELICA, Jozef: *Odovzdávať vieru v súčasnej spoločnosti*. Trnava : Dobrá kniha, 2006, p. 19.

3 Cf. RÁBEK, František: *Farnosť – miesto a východisko pastorácie*. In: *Nová evanjelizácia II : Zborník sympózia s medzinárodnou účasťou*. Trnava : Dobrá kniha, 1993, p. 5.

and supported new theological discoveries and proposed a new ecclesiology as a “magna carta for the future of the Church”.

The Council, however, due to the isolation of our local Church from the Universal Church didn't achieve its beneficial impact in its entire richness. Even the priests did not become irrigation systems through which should flow the Council's revitalizing blood and so naturally the whole parish life remains anemic.

It's true, that in our parishes operate many young priests, which came to be through the seminars of the “Velvet Revolution”. However, the formation didn't take into account in its full extent, the requirements of the modern age nor the entire richness of the Council's teachings.⁴

And so remains the hesitation between the desire to renew pastoral care and fear that it could doubt the practice thus far.

Feel a certain convulsing between the enchantment of the new ideas and the inability to determine where to start or how to make the first steps.

The uncertainty whether to open oneself to the richness of service, which can be provided by active laymen is still present.

A priest feels and sees the urgent need to integrate all the already existing and active forces of the Church operating in the parish (groups, associations, movements, services) into his plan of action for the parish, however, he doesn't have the practical experience and isn't taught how to react properly.

A barrier is also the situation in which many priests find themselves in for their solitude. For each person it's a sad and negative experience, but for a priest it can be the cause of an existential stray, pastoral drought, loss of meaning and importance of his assignment and often a crisis of profession. A priest without society is like a person without family. Collapsing is a threat.

2. Penetration of the Council's ecclesiology into the parish

The present day Church has liberated itself from its past individualism and subjectivity in its policy towards the parish and prefers the parish as an embodiment of the Church and as a society of the salvation of Christ's action.

The Council's teaching about the parish is tied to the theology of the Local Church. By the Constitution *Lumen gentium* a parish is a real Church. “*This Church of Christ is truly present in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful which, united with their pastors, are themselves called churches in the New Testament...*”⁵ The same Council then claims that those individual

4 Cf. RÁBEK, F.: Farnost – miesto a východisko pastorácie. In: *Nová evanjelizácia II : Zborník sympózia s medzinárodnou účasťou*, p. 5.

5 *Lumen gentium*, no. 26. In: *Dokumenty Druhého vatikánskeho koncilu I : Konštitúcie*. Trnava : SSV, 1993.

parishes can be called by Paul the "Church of God", however for the Council to express the difference between a diocese and a parish, the parish is given the marking in a mediated form: *"Let priests so lead and serve their local community that it may worthily be called by that name, by which the one and entire people of God is signed, namely, the Church of God (cf. 1 Cor 1,2; 2 Cor 1,1 and elsewhere)."*⁶

The Council also says that the parish is also the local embodiment of the Church as a community. In a parish the church as a community becomes an apparent sign. *"In these communities, though frequently small and poor, or living in the Diaspora, Christ is present, and in virtue of His presence there is brought together one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church."*⁷

All efforts to build a community have its roots in Eucharist. *"But for the celebration of the Eucharist, if it is to be genuine and complete, should lead to various works of charity and mutual help, as well as to missionary activity and to different forms of Christian witness."*⁸ All dimensions of the parish life, the spreading of God's word, testimony of merciful love and service all intervene and build *communio* of the parish.⁹

We are searching for the answer to the question, whether the present day parish and its present day method of pastoral care can answer the religious needs of people in the new situation of a pluralistic society, in a situation of additional changes in society, which force the Church to adopt the responsible attitude.

The accusation that pastoral care in present day parishes creates believers who are consumers of a cult and of sacraments and that parish areas are in many places an impregnable fortress, that pastoral care is narrowed into the four walls of the church and that it uses a more moral than evangelizing tone in homilies and various speeches and that the approach to believers is en masse without the need of categorizing and that laymen are not active enough and that there is still present reticence to disgust toward the community in many parishes, is all true. It is also true, that in this moment this form of pastoral care of parishes cannot meet the demand of various types of addressees.¹⁰

3. The vision of an open parish

Parishes must make room for new evangelization. That takes mostly the will to change in all church officials. Building a parish using the new vi-

6 *Lumen gentium*, no. 28.

7 *Lumen gentium*, no. 26.

8 *Presbyterorum ordinis*, no. 6. In: *Dokumenty Druhého vatikánskeho koncilu II : Dekréty a deklarácie*. Trnava : SSV, 1993.

9 Cf. *Leksykon teologii pastoralnej*. Ed. R. Kamiński, W. Przygoda, M. Fiałkowski. Lublin, 2006, p. 591.

10 Cf. KYSELICA, Jozef: *Evanjelizačné ponuky pre mládež vo farskej pastorácii*. In: HOSPODÁR, M. (ed.): *Dar viery a impulzy novej evanjelizácie*. Prešov : GTF PU, 2012, p. 95.

sion which comes from the Council teachings about the Church will take the renouncement of a solely cleric pastoral care and the opening to the co-responsibility and co-participation of each Christian.¹¹ The making of a vivid communities, charities, pluralistic and vivid liturgy, missionary spirit, and open communication.

A community is probably the first task and challenge for parishes as center of religious service to change into a place, where believers can brotherly experience faith, mutually address and enrich each other, celebrate in unity their faith and feel responsible for the task of evangelization.

When Ladislav Csonotos contemplates on the means of effective categorization of pastoral care in a parish, he writes: "As a common denominator of all these activities, we can specify the building of a strong parish community through the creation of small communities and intensifying the individual and community life of faith, which inspires even through all the risks not only optimism but also true Christian hope."¹²

To make a community, work is needed. Arousing the unconscious of necessity, giving space for meeting and mutual exchange, preparing and sending charismatic individuals.¹³

The community must live and grow from the liturgy. Because of that, the parish must be creative and must offer the community spaces to meet, where faith is lived and expressed by various ways of celebration. To ensure a dignified celebrating is going to take the inviting into liturgy many of the members of the parish community all the way from the receiver group to the commentators, to the lectors, to special distributors of Eucharist till the psalmists, choir and those who prepare agape. It all takes a long process, but the meaning of it is for everyone to find their own place, which matches their own expectations and level. What should also not be absent in the evangelization of the parish are catechumenate groups with their own agenda of introducing God's word, prayer, liturgy and community.¹⁴

A renewed parish has to show a serving Church in many aspects of the deanery. To the most important belongs charity, which should liven up the social awareness of the rest of the parish, motivate participation on speeches of solidarity, and help discover those of us who are miserable, extremely poor, marginalized or sick and also welcome them to the community and break the barriers.¹⁵

The first means of evangelization is the testimony of an authentic Christian life – *martyria*. A renewed parish provides firstly a testimony of what we

11 Cf. ŠOSTÁK, Vladimír: *Nová skladba pastorácie*. Lipany, 2008.

12 CSONTOS, Ladislav: Otázniky nad kresťanskou rodinou na Slovensku. In: *Viera a život*, XXII, 2012, no. 6.

13 Cf. KYSELICA, J.: Evanjelizačné ponuky pre mládež vo farskej pastorácii. In: HOSPODÁR, M. (ed.): *Dar viery a impulzy novej evanjelizácie*, p. 98.

14 Cf. KYSELICA, J.: Evanjelizačné ponuky pre mládež vo farskej pastorácii. In: HOSPODÁR, M. (ed.): *Dar viery a impulzy novej evanjelizácie*, p. 100.

15 Cf. KYSELICA, J.: Evanjelizačné ponuky pre mládež vo farskej pastorácii. In: HOSPODÁR, M. (ed.): *Dar viery a impulzy novej evanjelizácie*, p. 98.

believe in and what we live. It's not just about the testimony of the individual, but also the testimony of the entire community. The position of the testimony will require the breaking of former practices through which people met in the parish, but didn't leave to search. Those who we want to reach have usually other temples and other interests and we have to go to them and give them an attractive enough offer.

A change of approach is also needed towards the distant that turn to the parish with the request for service or social support. The administrative relationship should be replaced by attention and respect. Respect is not the expression of a weak conviction, but the expression of the understanding of reality, that the other also lives with certain opinions. We tell of our faith with zeal in service. That is our testimony and our offer.¹⁶

To the new style of evangelization also belongs the overcoming of particularisms and is characterized by a unity in exercising wider and more universal projects of pastoral care. That type of pastoral care spreads its activity even over the range of the parish (deanery, region, diocese). Programs of youth and family pastoral care have already been designed this way. Some programs exceed the possibilities of one parish and can only be realized with the participation of other parishes, religious and laymen communities and movements.¹⁷

Of course, to the evangelical pastoral care also belongs joint responsibility. Basically that means the relationship with laymen, to recognize their competence and invite them to cooperation. Joint responsibility isn't just limited to participation in church activities but also laymen must be the evangelizers of their environment and surroundings. That is why it is important for apostolic movements to exist in a parish in which laymen are evangelized and also evangelize.¹⁸

The Church which until recently in our regions operated for changes that occurred cannot operate in the same manner as before. Theologian Wilhelm Zauner says that the Church will be able to react to all requests which have appeared only from the logic in Pentecost. That means that it has to have at its disposal various types of languages, activities and symbols so that the Church may communicate with different ideological systems and could introduce them the gospel. The new evangelization is a process which requires a lot of creativity and fantasy from Christians.¹⁹

16 Cf. KYSELICA, J.: Evanjelizačné ponuky pre mládež vo farskej pastorácii. In: HOSPODÁR, M. (ed.): *Dar viery a impulzy novej evanjelizácie*, p. 99.

17 Cf. KYSELICA, J.: Evanjelizačné ponuky pre mládež vo farskej pastorácii. In: HOSPODÁR, M. (ed.): *Dar viery a impulzy novej evanjelizácie*, p. 101.

18 Cf. KYSELICA, J.: Evanjelizačné ponuky pre mládež vo farskej pastorácii. In: HOSPODÁR, M. (ed.): *Dar viery a impulzy novej evanjelizácie*, p. 101.

19 Cf. KYSELICA, J.: Evanjelizačné ponuky pre mládež vo farskej pastorácii. In: HOSPODÁR, M. (ed.): *Dar viery a impulzy novej evanjelizácie*, p. 103.

4. Models of evangelization of parish pastoral care

If I am to indicate the path of the new evangelization in our parishes, I will firstly refer to two models how to liven up parish pastoral care and bring the life of the parish community closer to the ecclesiastical image of the Vatican Council II.

The first model comes from France and is said to be ecclesiology from the bottom. The main roles take the laymen. The theological basis of the model is the Constitution of the Vatican Council II, *Lumen gentium*. The Church is not where the church building is built nor where the priest is, but mainly where Christians, who were summoned there by God, meet. This initiative was born in the years from 1988 to 1993 in the diocese Poitiers and its synod, where the participants decided to do something like ecclesiology from scratch.²⁰ According to the local archbishop it's a process which missionary way establishes the Church in Poitiers anew. In the scope of newly drafted parish entities only small local communities should be able to form. In practice that meant that in each place had to be found a few convinced believers, who were willing to create this kind of local community. After that they were to go to the bishop and ask him to officially ecclesiastically recognize their local community. It's a concept which is absolutely relied on mystagogy. A person who in the penetration of their own experience with the gospel which was mediated to him by the Church comes to faith, after which he connects to other believers to form a community. The bishop doesn't have the intention to automatically accept their request for ecclesiastical recognition. First he waits for a community of convinced believers to select from themselves people for three basic services: one person responsible for praying, the second for the help of the needy and the third to give testimonies. The bishop delegates them to act upon these services for a certain period of time (three years or even six years). These three people are supplemented by one more, who manages finance and finally one more, who leads the community. These take care of those with interest, by inviting them to cooperation. This is how ecclesiastical society which is resistant, resilient and actionable and only after that do they receive an ordained office bearer (priest) and an ecclesiastical recognition. This priest doesn't live in the local community. When he comes, he heads Eucharist, through baptism he accepts into the Church, he cares for the community to walk in the footsteps of Jesus and is in connection with other communities and churches.²¹

Another model comes from the Hungarian town Káposztásmegyér and is the so called model of a growing parish pastoral care. The starting point is in the catechumenate catechesis. It is done mainly by a team of laymen for

²⁰ Cf. ZULEHNER, P. M., NEUNER, P.: *Cirkev v dnešnom svete : Potreba alebo prežitok*, p. 195.

²¹ Cf. ZULEHNER, P. M., NEUNER, P.: *Cirkev v dnešnom svete : Potreba alebo prežitok*, p. 196–197.

adults who are already baptized but didn't pass through a thorough catechumenate even though they occasionally go to church. The catechesis has two mutually balanced components: understanding and formation. The subject is explained by a member of the team. The theme is then thoroughly discussed in small groups; on the next lesson the subject is tested. The formation part begins with the testimonies of the members of the team, which has to do with the discussed subject. On this basis the participants get practical "homework" and on the next lesson they tell of their achievements, what experience they got – that way they are also learning how to make their own testimonies. This way the catechesis is a true introduction into Christian life, community and testimony. After finishing the cycle the participants can usually find space for the realization in the parish community as lecturers, responsible for music, singing, parish newspaper and so on.

Mature Christians also take care of the evangelization of the parish by daily individual contacts and using parish activities. For example on the parish playground it is possible to make contact with the mothers and fathers of the children and in a suitable way arouse their interest in catechumenate catechesis.²²

Currently the parish that we mention has approximately 70 lecturers who are taking care of 20 groups of catechization. It is the result of an almost 15-year struggle in a neighborhood of thirty thousand, which was drafted as atheistic and people didn't go to mass. However there were two laymen, who were capable of cooperation with the spiritual to build a parish community; that was the beginning. It's a fascinating example and actual evidence that the catechumenate is the heart of a dynamic model of pastoral care of the parish.

This way the parish community grows in numbers and in the quality of the spiritual life. It is becoming the school of sacraments, community and prayer.

Now I want to present one model evangelization of the parish with which I am personally familiar with: it is the neocatechumenate path. The history of this path is closely intertwined with two people and their own history, with Kiko (Francisco Argüell) and Carmen Hernández and with Madrid, where the poor district formed the first community (1966); their formation was based on some kind of tripod – word, liturgy and community.²³ To Slovakia this path came in the year 1978 during totality. In Slovakia are approximately 60 communities in almost all greater cities. The neocatechumenate is a charisma summoned to serve the Christian renewal on the horizon which was opened by the Vatican Council II.²⁴

Pope John Paul II, when seeing this new vitality which enlivens parishes and rouses the missionary impulse in a way, that it gives so many more mission-

22 Cf. LENCZ, Ladislav: Katechumenátna katechéza. Katechumenátna pastorácia. In: www.communio.sk

23 Cf. KYSELICA, Jozef: *Obnova farnosti cez neokatechumenát*. Trnava : Dobrá kniha, 1998, p. 77.

24 Cf. KYSELICA, J.: *Obnova farnosti cez neokatechumenát*, p. 68.

ary, religious and priestly vocations, said: "I recognize the neocatechumenate way as a way of Catholic formation, valid for the current society."²⁵

When a parish priest accepts the offer of responsible for a neocatechumenate and wants to have it in his parish, there comes a team of chosen catechists for a few weeks lecture to the assembled interested in Existential Catechism. In the end, those that wish to stay, create a community in which the formation continues in a catechumenate manner. The community meets for their formation every week for the reading of the gospel and its comments toward real life. Once a week on Saturday night the members meet to celebrate Eucharist and once a month they have a meeting for the entire day and coexistence, in which mutual relations deepen and some newly formed problems are discussed. The fruit of this intensive formation is an inner change and reaching a mature faith which is shown outside by a life of mutual love and missionary work. From the community a team is again chosen who evangelizes the parish environment summoning to the new community.

This way the parish is slowly changing into a community of communities. The parish was evangelized through small communities so that it could evangelize its surroundings.

The testimony of the members of this path can be found on every level, individual, community and social; everyone engages in pastoral care mediated as either catechists in the family, between colleagues in work and everywhere they appear or they are in the services of the church or community or they receive a vocation for charity work with poor, sick or abandoned.²⁶

5. Aging and the renewal of the community

I have outlined three models of how evangelization in a parish may occur in the sense of the renewal of the life of faith for the believers in a parish and their belonging to the Church.

Some questions are still to be answered. Why does it happen, that in some place the Church and its institutions are dying, why are parishes losing viability and readiness for action? And another question is, what fuels the dynamicity, the new renewing spirit of a community or institution.

Martin F. Saarinen, an American of Finish roots, a Methodist, conducted a study about the whereabouts of the viability of a Church community. The used criteria can be used also in Catholic communities. Saarinen found out, that Christian communities and organizations have a life cycle. It begins by birth, continues through childhood and adolescence and peaks at adulthood. Then

²⁵ KYSELICA, J.: *Obnova farnosti cez neokatechumenát*, p. 187.

²⁶ Cf. KYSELICA, J.: *Obnova farnosti cez neokatechumenát*, pp. 129–135.

the organization grows old: it passes through stages of maturity, aristocracy, bureaucracy and finally dies. And this also applies to church organizations such as parish communities, spiritual movements and orders.²⁷

Saarinen says that young organizations must grow and mature organizations have to learn to grow old. Primarily: an organization is born from the strength of a vision. The same was with the Christian Church, which was born out of Jesus's vision. From what Jesus said and did, he was the embodiment of the vision of the world in which God's dream about creation became reality. The logo for his vision was the "Kingdom of God". To realize his vision through history, he summoned people, who were infected by it. It was not just any community, it had a vision. It was to be a city on a mountain, which would shine (cf. Mt 5:14) and be salt (cf. Mt 5:13). It was to show to the world how people live where God's love is spread and so also the love that is mutually among people and where in this manner is appearing in their lives the Kingdom of God.

What is the main point of a vision? Forcing the Church to continuously develop itself and cleanse itself. That is the part of the program "ecclesia semper reformanda".²⁸

If this vision is loosened the organization begins to age and rely upon the laws and the administrative. Finally it's just about money and power and not about God. This dying image of the Church can be successfully managed a long time. However, its end can be foreseen. However, there's always the possibility of the miracle of resurrection. It happens when God speaks to people to mediate his vision. These people are called charismatic leaders.

When we look at the models of renewal of Christian life in a parish, which have grown old and have stopped being productive, we see that the power of their resurrection was given to them from the vision, Christ's vision, which was brought and developed further by charismatic people.

When we talk about pastoral evangelization or the renewal of a parish, we have to expect some charismatic individuals who are able to live with Christ's vision. And those types of charismatics can be also the members of a parish community or a charisma which was allowed by the Church in the form of a movement or community.

If we look at the life in our parishes critically, at the work of priests and laymen, we have remark, that only very few parishes, built their renewal upon the rediscovery of the vision with the help of charismatic leaders or movements.

And there are many parishes in which the priest works till the last drop to ensure a sacramental, catechetical and worshiping service. However the laymen stay passive as consumerists of the cult. Two big lines of ecclesiology of the Vatican Council II are still left untouched in Slovakia.

²⁷ Cf. ZULEHNER, P. M., NEUNER, P.: *Cirkev v dnešnom svete : Potreba alebo prežitok*, p. 168.

²⁸ Cf. ZULEHNER, P. M., NEUNER, P.: *Cirkev v dnešnom svete : Potreba alebo prežitok*, p. 171.

And that is the current appeal for the Slovak Church. A Church which has a vision and has its eyes and ears open for God and his Holy Spirit. As he doesn't only renew the shape of Earth but also the shape of his Church.

Conclusion

Renewal of our parishes, for them to correspond to the spirit of the Vatican Council II, has already in several countries of the Old Continent its models. To get them into our parishes will require the initiation of a movement toward their renewal and acquire for them repeated support.

Support from the side of the bishops, to allow in parishes with interest the conduction of experiments with some of the models.

Support from the side of the pastoralists, to design projects of renewal considering also the experiences of the Church in other countries.

It's necessary to gain the support of the heads of seminars, so that it would be possible to talk with the future pastoral care workers about new models and practical use of the ecclesiology of the Council, either with clerics or laymen.

Let us insert this effort under the Star of the new evangelization. Mary cooperated with prayers and motherly presence with the apostles and disciples of Lord Jesus, for them to get the gifts of the Holy Spirit to found the first Christian community.²⁹ The Council teaches that Mary is closely related to the history of salvation³⁰ and Ján Ďurica further develops this idea, when he says: "This presence of Mary is day by day presenting itself in a variety of ways. ... It is faith and piety of the individual believers, traditions of the Christian families, or so to say house churches, parish and missionary communities and institutes of religious orders..."³¹

For this reason, the Church in all of its lifespan is keeping a connection with the Mother of God, which in the secret of salvation includes the past, the present and the future.³² And so also includes our hope for the renewal of our parishes.

29 Cf. ĎURICA, J.: *Mária – Hviezda novej evanjelizácie : Z vybraných apoštolských listov a homílií Jána Pavla II.* Trnava : Dobrá kniha, 2009.

30 Cf. *Lumen gentium*, no. 65.

31 Cf. ĎURICA, J.: *Mária – Hviezda novej evanjelizácie : Z vybraných apoštolských listov a homílií Jána Pavla II.*, p. 109.

32 Cf. ĎURICA, J.: *Mária – Hviezda novej evanjelizácie : Z vybraných apoštolských listov a homílií Jána Pavla II.*, p. 119.

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