

In the Church and/or in the world

Remarks on the self-construction of laypeople in the Czech Catholic Church¹

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The Second Vatican Council defines the term layperson and it is given the same dignity as clergy and religious. Everyone who is baptised is also made a sharer in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ. The faith of laypeople is not supposed to be secret but public, to be clear and visible in world. They work for the sanctification of the world from within. Active laypeople often do not work only in the world but also inside their parishes to help pastors with pastoral care. How do laypeople live their Christianity in the world and in their parishes? Does their experience correspond to the theology of the Second Vatican Council? This paper describes laypeople according to the Second Vatican Council and the Magisterium's teaching since then, and it presents the results of the empirical qualitative research among a focus group of several active laypeople of the Diocese of České Budějovice who have completed the Course for Active Laypeople at the Faculty of Theology of the University of South Bohemia.

Key words: laypeople, practical theology, qualitative research, focus group.

Introduction

There was a course called the Course for Active Laypeople at the Faculty of Theology of the University of South Bohemia between the years 2016 – 2019. No such course has been ever realized at Czech theological faculties. I was in charge of the educational content of the course; therefore, I had the possibility to meet all the students personally. I discovered a considerable group of laypeople, who were aware of the future of the Church and wanted to take part

¹ This study is a result of research funded by GAJU no. 138/2019/H.

in that future. This group and also my personal experience as a layperson in a parish made me interested in the topic of laypeople. The concern is visible in the Czech academic sphere as well.² Who is a layperson? Who is he supposed to be and what is his self-conception? These are the basic questions to be answered in this paper. The aim of the paper is a comparative analysis of the theological conception of the laity and their own self-construction. I will operate in the current paradigm of Practical Theology. Also, I will use empirical methods to explore the pastoral praxis and theologically reflect on the results of the empirical research.

The term "layperson" is derived from the Greek word *laos*, which means people. According to the Bible a layperson is part of the people, the chosen people of God. In the later Church the term layperson is rather derived from the word *laikos* (belonging to the people), which describes things or persons who have no relation to the ministry.³ The people of God changed and turned into a complicated hierarchical structure over time⁴ and they were replaced by a two-class society: holders of power and offices, being the clergy, and the others, who are the laypeople.⁵ The status of the laypeople basically did not change until the Second Vatican Council. Logically, the theological basis for the paper will be constituted by the documents of the Council, which contain the theology of the laity. These documents are the constitution *Lumen gentium* and the decree *Apostolicam actuositatem*. Based on these documents the ideal type of the layperson will be constructed and it will be compared to the praxis of the laypeople. The method of ideal types will be used for comparison. This method is originally sociological; however, it is also used in theology.⁶

The paper is divided into several parts. The first is focused on the ideal type of the layperson. The methods of the empirical research will be debated in the next part. The research in the paper is qualitative and the technique used is a focus group. The research question is the following: What is the mission of the layperson in his own point of view? (Jak vnímá křesťanský laik své poslání?) The results of the research will be presented in the next part. These are categories that were constructed after the horizontal and vertical analysis of the interview with the focus groups. The categories will be presented in separate thematical units. The relations among the categories will be described, as will their theological interpretation. The last part will deal with a comparison of the ideal type and the pastoral praxis of the laypeople.

2 OPATRŇÝ, A.: *Pastorální teologie pro laiky*, Červený Kostelec: Pavel Mervart, 2016; KAPLÁNEK, M.: *Znamení naděje. Česká církev ve světle závěrečného dokumentu plenárního sněmu – kritická analýza*, Brno : CDK, 2016 and SPALOVÁ, B. et al.: *Laici a klérus v české katolické církvi. Na cestě ke spiritualitě spolupráce?* Brno : CDK, 2017.

3 Cf. NEUNER, P., ZUHLENER, P., M.: *Přijď království tvé. Praktické učení o církvi*, Praha : Vyšehrad, 2013, pp. 128 – 129.

4 See NEUNER, P.: *Laici a klérus. Společenství Božího lidu*, Praha : Vyšehrad, 1997, pp. 33 – 88.

5 Cf. NEUNER, P., ZUHLENER, P., M.: *Přijď království tvé. Praktické učení o církvi*, pp. 131 – 133.

6 The method of ideal types is originally used by Max Weber. Explained more in ŠÍDLOVÁ, J.: *Malá společenství církve jako prostor pro náboženskou edukaci*, diplomová práce, České Budějovice, 2015, p. 9.

The theological ideal type

The theological ideal of the laity will be constructed according to the documents of the Second Vatican Council: the constitution *Lumen gentium* (LG) and the decree *Apostolicam actuositatem* (AA). However, first of all there should be also mentioned the document *Gaudium et spes* as the document that strongly expresses the spirit of the council.⁷ The pastoral constitution of the Second Vatican Council *Gaudium et spes* has a strong focus on the nature and mission of the laity in the world, specifically in two points: The first is that the laity have to take the initiative in the transformation of the temporal order.⁸ And secondly, regarding the role of the laity, the Council accepts and encourages lay persons to pursue advanced studies in theology and Scripture.⁹ Pavel Ambros, the Czech practical theologian, considers *Lumen gentium* and the decree *Apostolicam actuositatem* as documents to be the fundamental but asymmetric documents about the laity.¹⁰ Moreover *Apostolicam actuositatem* reflected predominantly the work of Yves Congar¹¹, whose classic work on the laity had been published ten years earlier before the document was written. An objection can be raised that there exist other documents of the Magisterium on the laity¹² and also Pope Francis talks often about the laity. However, I decided to use only the texts mentioned above for they contain the theological basis, which is obviously developed by the subsequent theology but not changed in any way.¹³ Moreover, there is a controversy in the contemporary Catholic Church on the interpretation of the Council documents. I therefore find it useful to turn to these texts even more.

The constitution *Lumen gentium* deals with the Church as a whole; the laity are the topic of the fourth chapter. The content of the constitution is theological without a larger number of practical implications. These can be found in the decree *Apostolicam actuositatem*. Generally, LG¹⁴ turns upside down the traditional division between the clergy and the laity¹⁵ and both are given the same dignity. Both are the wandering People of God and holders

7 Cf. KRONZAR, A.: Duch koncilu. Význam pastorální konstituce *Gaudium et spes* pro interpretaci a aktualizaci II. vatikánského koncilu. In: *Caritas et Veritas*. Vol. 6, 2016, No. 1, pp. 33 – 43.

8 GS 43.

9 Ibid., 62.

10 Cf. AMBROS, P.: *Křesťan a život ve světě: odkaz předkoncilní diskuse teologie „laikátu“ a Druhého vatikánského koncilu dnešní praxi církve*. Olomouc : Univerzita Palackého, Cyrilometodějská teologická fakulta, 1998, p. 97.

11 CONGAR, Y.: *Lay People in the Church*. Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957.

12 For instance, the exhortation of the pope John Paul II *Christifideles laici* or his apostolic letter *Novo millennio inasistente*.

13 These publications can serve as the examples from the Czech and Slovak contemporary theology on the laity. AMBROS, P.: *Laik a jeho poslání: mučednictví – svědectví*. Olomouc : Refugium Velehrad-Roma, 2011, ŠMIDRIAK, O.: *Pastorační spolupráce kňazov a laikov: – utópia alebo reálna vízia?* Ružomberok : Verbum, 2012, AMBROS, P.: *Křesťan a život ve světě: odkaz předkoncilní diskuse teologie „laikátu“ a Druhého vatikánského koncilu dnešní praxi církve*.

14 LG 8.

15 The situation before the council describes for example PESCH, O. H.: *Druhý Vatikánský Koncil 1962 – 1965*, Praha : Vyšehrad, 1996, pp. 133 – 138 or the article by KAPLÁNEK, M.: Místo teologicky vzdělaných křesťanů laiků v pastoraci. In: *Studia Theologica*. Vol. 9, no. 4, 2007 or the lecture by DULLES, A.:

of the common priesthood and they participate in the offices of Christ: the offices of teaching, governing and sanctifying.¹⁶ A different form of division still remains: the clergy and religious are primarily focused on the ministry and mission within the Church, and the laity have a different task. The laypeople are supposed to “seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God”. In other words, they should be active in the world, to be the “salt of the earth”, to operate in profane professions, improve the condition of profane institutions and proclaim the gospel by their own testimony. There should also be a familiar dialogue between the laity and their spiritual leaders based on obedience and cooperation. The decree *Aspostolicam actuositatem* develops the practical side of the laity – the basic fundamentals for pastoral use are given and it also explores so-called Catholic Action.¹⁷ The decree suggests for the laypeople not to separate their connection with Christ in any part of their lives, which will help them to fulfil God’s will in their whole lives. The key factor is prayer and the Eucharist. The text also names three main objectives of the laity apostolate: evangelization and sanctification, the Christian renewal of the temporal order, and charity. Evangelization and sanctification are not exclusively based on the witness of one’s way of life, and the Council calls for a more active approach, “to explain, defend, and properly apply Christian principles to the problems of our era in accordance with the mind of the Church”.¹⁸ The decree points to the distortion of the temporal order during the time and personal responsibility of each layperson for renewal according to the gospel. The last objective of the lay apostolate is charity, the consequence of Christ’s greatest commandment. The Council refers to the contemporary world as to a global family where “these charitable enterprises can and should reach out to all persons and all needs.”¹⁹ The decree also talks about various fields of the apostolate. These are parish communities, where the laypeople cooperate on different tasks within the community of the Church, and families, where various forms of apostolate also exist.²⁰ The other task is also to manifest and prove by their own way of life the importance of the Christian family and communicate the faith to their children. The final field of the apostolate is the social and political environment on both the national and international levels. The Council also emphasises education and formation for the apostolate of the laity. Families, priests, Church educational institutions, and groups and associations²¹ of the laity are responsible for the right education and formation.

Mission of the Laity, L. J. McGinley Lecture, Fordham University, March 29, 2006, URL=http://www.laikos.org/Mission%20of%20the%20Laity_CardinalDulles.pdf.

¹⁶ LG 4.

¹⁷ Cf. AMBROZ, P.: *Laik a jeho poslání. Mučednictví – svědectví*, pp. 72 – 91.

¹⁸ AA 6.

¹⁹ AA 8.

²⁰ AA 11 gives a list of these activities: the adoption of abandoned infants, hospitality to strangers, assistance in the operation of schools, helpful advice and material assistance for adolescents, help to engaged couples in preparing themselves better for marriage, catechetical work, support of married couples and families involved in material and moral crises.

²¹ These associations (such as Catholic Action) are talked about in the rest of the decree.

The ideal type of the layperson is obedient to the spiritual shepherds and cooperates with the priests. He is firmly rooted in his faith and well-formed and educated for the apostolate. The main objective is activity outside the Church – he is supposed to proclaim the gospel and sanctify the world by his deeds. He should also be active in the public sphere, act in charity, or at least support it. The important field is family life: manifest the Christian family, pass the faith on to the children and give help to other families. The support of the parish priest is obviously important but not the main goal. At the end of this part there should be noticed that the ideal type is not supposed to be an exhaustive theological reflection over the laity. The ideal type in a mental construct (it is ideal in the sense of the idea) and based on the relevant theoretical components. It is used often for a comparison. In theology, the ideal types were used by Ernest Troeltsch and also Avery Dulles.²²

Research: the focus group

The research took place on 22nd June 2019 at the Faculty of Theology, University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice. The technique of a focus group was chosen for the research. The focus group is a technique used in the qualitative research. This type of empirical research employs mostly the inductive method, and there is more than one way for qualitative research practice.²³ Qualitative research finds its focus in idiographic knowledge (unlike the quantitative research) and tries to describe the lived realities of individuals and groups in particular settings and to give the reader the theoretical comparisons and explanations that can be used elsewhere.²⁴ A total of 15 persons participated in the research, being between 25 to 70 years old. They knew each other from the course for Active Laypeople. The group consisted of 5 men and 10 women (including one couple) from various parishes around the diocese of České Budějovice. They knew the researcher from the course as well. The number of people exceeded the recommended number of members of the focus group. According to the literature the ideal number is six to ten persons.²⁵ David L. Morgan notes that he took part in research where the number of participants was even higher (up to 20) and the group still worked well. This was the reason why I decided not to divide the group and to leave it the way it was. The participants were asked these questions: 1. Who is a layperson in your opinion? 2. How has your life as a layperson gone? 3. How do you experience your life as a layperson at the present? 4. What is your ideal form of

22 Cf. DULLES, A.: *Models of the Church*. 5th expanded edition. New York: Image Book, Doubleday Publishers, 2002, p. 17.

23 Cf. HENDL, J.: *Kvalitativní výzkum. Základní teorie, metody a aplikace*. Praha : Portál, 2008, p. 52

24 Cf. SWINTON, J., MOWAT, H.: *Practical Theology and qualitative research*. 2. edition, London : SCM, 2016, pp. 41 – 42.

25 For an evaluation of the literature see MORGAN, D., L.: *Ohniskové skupiny jako metoda kvalitativního výzkumu*, Boskovice: Albert, 2001.

the laity and how far are you from the ideal? 5. How do you see the future of the laity? The interview of the focus group was moderated by the researcher.

The interview lasted two hours and it was recorded on two recording devices (mobile phones) and then transcribed²⁶ into a text version (without the commented transcription). Some of the less comprehensible parts were stylistically adjusted since the research is focused on the content and the topics of the interviews. Afterwards, the transcribed text was coded. The coding is the data analysis which leads to their interpretation, conceptualisation and new integration.²⁷ Open coding was used.²⁸ The open coding regards the text as a whole and tries to find all the various meanings in the data and gradually reveals the topics that are repeated in the transcript and step by step crystallize into general categories. The coding was horizontal and vertical: the topics were searched for in the answers of the individual participants and in the text overall. The coding was carried out with regard to the research question: *What is the mission of the layperson in his own point of view?* The discovered categories were arranged around the helping questions, which develop the basic questions. The helping questions are below. The first two are connected to the theoretical level and the second two to the practical one.

1. What is the definition of the laity according to the participants?
2. How do they perceive the laity on a general level?
3. What do they do in their lay praxis?
4. What circumstances do they face in their praxis?²⁹

1. The answer to the first question can be summed up under three categories: *exclusive definition*, *inclusive definition* and the *definition connected to the activity*. First of all, the layperson is a person who is not the clergy, who is not consecrated, who does not belong to the hierarchy, who did not study theology, who is not reserved for Church ministry or does not have strictly defined obligations. Secondly, the layperson is everyone who is baptised and every parishioner. Third, the layperson is defined by his activity. He is keen to contribute by his activities and work, being one who helps and carries out ministry or organizes something, and who helps the priest.

2. The categories under the second helping question on the laity on a general level are following: *We versus they*, *turning point*, *practical aspects of the laity definition* and *leadership*. The category *we versus they* includes a vast number of statements, which radically changed (with some participants) during the interview. In the first part of the interview, when the research participants talked about their life experience with the laity, they distinguish

²⁶ The application Gboard from Google was used.

²⁷ Cf. HENDL, J.: *Kvalitativní výzkum. Základní teorie, metody a aplikace*, p. 246.

²⁸ Cf. CORBIN, J., STRAUSS, A.: *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, Boston : SAGE, 2015, p. 44.

²⁹ The categories and interpretations were translated from Czech into English by the researcher with the help of a native speaker. The participants used very informal language, which caused some translation problems.

very often between them (active laypeople or the whole active family) and the others. The latter only visit Sunday Mass to take in the offered services; they do not want to participate in anything or even criticize active laypeople ("I have experiences many times that something was made and some people started to criticize it that it could have been done in a better way or it can't be done in any way as you have to keep the quality, I don't agree with that"). There is an effort to engage with these people or give a good example ("When I saw these people, it was clear that none of them wanted to do anything, so it was up to us. If someone else started I would join him, but I saw that we had to start or nothing would change"). In the following questions, when the participants tried to describe their ideal of the laity or reflect their experience, they were much more conciliatory and the sharp distinction partly faded. The group generally comes to the fact that there is no ideal of the laity as everyone is different, and we never see the context ("he includes everyone in his parish, not only the active, because you don't know if he has someone ill at home and that's why he hurries home after the Mass. May everyone work according to the God's will") of his life and cannot judge without prejudice his faith or (for us) indivisible activities somewhere else ("someone is perfectly happy silent in the church and then leaves. He is maybe different than us, he doesn't want to organize anything but he might have God much stronger in his heart, more than we can imagine"). However, most of the participants try to invite and involve the others in their parishes.

The second category is called *turning point*. It is a substantial change in one's life and after it (and due to it) they became active in their parishes. This turning point is sometimes related to conversion ("I answered Jesus and he answered me. And my life changed then and since that time I feel God's guidance, from then to right now") or deepening the faith after a faith renewal seminar (the seminar, it struck me so deeply and since that moment I knew I would help as much as possible and engage my whole life in the parish community") or some heavy change in one's life (death of a partner, serious illness, children leaving the house). Two participants were transformed by the Church movement which they joined ("these relatives invited me to Focolare and I was really enthused by it, that there is someone who really lives the gospel and I joined it really passionately (...) Since then I keep the idea that you can reach God through other people. It is an appeal for me to work for the Church and help everybody since I get closer to God").

The category *practical aspects of the laity definition* includes the inner and outer aspects of the laity ideal. The research participants talk about the necessity to be a good example of the laity, to be easy-going and to be more and more active. It is important not to become discouraged and work independently. There is a controversy between those who need the impulse and support of the priest and those who can work without it. In that case the priest can either obstruct the activity or the priests keep changing or there will not be any priest in the future. The outer aspect is the functioning community (or family) and keeping its integrity ("but she is a part of the community and it is

a pity if she keeps her talents and gifts just for herself. She should offer them to the community so it could gain from them”), its activities and proclaiming the gospel inside it. Evangelization is seen as proclaiming the faith by little steps, being a good example of life with Christ or at least not discouraging anyone.

The category *leadership* indicates that the research participants tend to be guided in their laity. They do not perceive their laity as static but as a journey of faith. Some of them talk about the guidance of the priest, however, most of them talk about the guidance of the Holy Spirit (“The Holy Spirit manages everything”) and through him fulfils God’s will. The guidance of the Spirit according to God’s will means to accept all the people who “they meet on their journey”. The leadership is carried out also through the community of believers. The category also includes the circumstances which the layperson faces on his journey. These circumstances change over time and the participants are aware of them and want to react to them (“God has probably some purpose because the number of priests and religious persons decreases and I say to myself: God why do you let it happen? Maybe the purpose is so we as the laypeople create some form of life that will be attractive to the people from the outside”).

3. The question exploring the proper activities of the participants can be answered by 6 categories: *inner activity*, *outside activity*, *meaningfulness*, *family*, *education* and *tiredness*. The category *inner activity* includes all the codes that are related to the lay activities inside the Church, the parishes or other communities. The research participants talk about their own activities (“I see myself in the present inside the parish community but not only with the people there but also with the people who cannot come there because they are ill and old. I don’t want them to feel outside the community (...) I bring them Jesus to feel they still belong to the parish”, “I do what is needed to be done, my wife has more activities, I do a lot of technical or helping stuff, I work with people a lot so I’m often tired of them so I’m rather somewhere alone and repairing something”). These activities are either managed by the priest or the laypeople create the ideas themselves (So, me and Marie from Nepomuk try to do things for our priest to do the community work well”, “so the activity is like we are active, especially the choir but it is totally separated from the priest”). This separation is not seen only negatively (“but it is going its own way even if there is a barrier, new people who work from the bottom emerge and it will work somehow”). On the other side there are many activities to be chosen in one particular parish (“otherwise I participate in various pilgrimages, worship events, as I say, there are many things to choose”).

The activities inside the parishes are considered to be very important and the participants put them in the first place. They find them also very meaningful. *Meaningfulness* is also connected to gratefulness and a feeling of debt (“it was such a gift for me that I received such gifts so I feel a duty to work and return it”, “I feel that I have to return it to the whole, to the people of the parish”).

The category *outside activity* was crystalizing during the interview due to the group interactions. As mentioned before, the participants answered the

first open questions by talking about their activities inside the parishes. The activities beyond were pointed at later, after the questions related to the future or the laity ideal. These outside activities include being a good (or even bad) example, (“because when you go outside the church you will meet various people with different opinions and they are not as open or friendly as the people from the parish. But they might be waiting for something”, “I would say that the people maybe see when you do something right but they more see when we do something wrong. We are kind of observed as believers for instance at work. Nobody is perfect but our imperfections are very visible.”) evangelization or pre-evangelization (“It looked like we would argue soon but finally it was a nice talk and it wasn’t like you are weird but everyone said their opinion and we respected it and maybe thought about it in the way a Christian does, at least for a while. So, this is proclaiming the gospel even if it is not evangelization in a direct sense”) and finally engaging in a public place. The last activity is, however, seen as an ideal for which personal braveness is needed (“I finally know what I wanted to say. The first thing was that a Christian should get involved in politics, the second is environmental responsibility according to the encyclical *Laudato si* and the third is doing responsible business, not to break the law, pay taxes, not to exploit nature. This is the evangelization which is extremely important. But you have to be brave to do it”). Two participants also describe their negative experience from local politics (“I was there for four years and it was just slavery, I realised that I’m not the right person there and I don’t fit there”, “I have to confirm that I was there also for years and the possibility to influence something is just so small (...) It was just lost time that led to no good result”). *Outside activities* are not put in the first place but rather seen (with one exception³⁰) as a complementary activity to their parish work. They see it as a hardly reachable ideal or a task for the future. Some of the participants also admit that the completed course opened their eyes in this question. Another opinion occurred that a person who is active in the parish cannot be active outside, and vice versa, as there is no time for it.

The category *family* emerged and it is related mainly to passing on the faith. It is a place where the faith is witnessed to and the faith is supposed to be passed on to the children in the family. One participant sees a happy Christian family as an ideal of the laity (“When you marry a religious man and you succeed in passing on the faith to the children and they also take their own children to the church, it is an ideal for me. When I see my parents are satisfied, even they take care of our old uncle and still have time for helping the priest, it is an ideal”). For some of the participants the children are a springboard for the lay activities while for some it is a brake as bringing up the children is more important than the lay work.

Education is another important category. The research participants agreed on the lack of theological education or lack of understanding of their

30 One of the participants talks about evangelization very passionately. She also talks about her experience in that field. However, she is a member of Neocatechumenal movement that organizes many evangelization activities.

own tradition. They want to be educated to be able to defend their faith and answer complicated questions within their families or outside them ("I got such difficult questions from my husband and I wasn't able to answer them and it was an impulse for me to search for education. I wanted to tell him something and maybe try to persuade him as he is not religious").

The last category in this part is *tiredness* or burnout. The laypeople often face it. One participant was going through a deep spiritual crisis after some unsuccessful activities in her parish and disharmony in her family caused by nonacceptance of her faith ("because I don't know now where and how and I have to keep a distance from the parish, from all the stuff I did, because I felt so tired and exhausted and all seemed to be in vain, I know we talked about it today, but I need more time to arrange things inside myself"). The others talked about exhaustion when their activities are not accepted by either the priests or the parishioners. At the same time, they find it necessary to overcome these adversities.

4. The last list of categories is related to the question: What circumstances do they face in their praxis? These are: *faith*, *role of the priest*, *integrity of community*, *dynamics of the laity* and *Church circumstances*. The category *faith* includes all the codes about the participant's faith, all of their theology.³¹ The laypeople reflect faith as an everyday relationship with God who is alive. The true faith is alive and joyful according to them. To live the faith means to follow the Gospel and God's will, and show one's life for Jesus Christ. It also means to accept the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The faith is supposed to be passed on, especially in the family. Besides, it is important to witness convincingly by one's own life. The faith is the main presumption for all the laity activities ("I have to mainly deepen my faith; all the activities will come themselves").

The category *role of the priest* is connected with a wide scale of evaluation – from the most positive to the most negative. The priest is the one who helps the participants with conversion or he invited them into the community ("the priest was immensely kind, I met such a wonderful person, he was such a personality and as I found later he was really busy but that time I was the most important person for him", "I cannot imagine I would join or go for the sacraments by myself. So, through the priest who has a sense of community ..."). He is also the one who has a great importance for the lay activities in both the positive and negative sense of the word. He is the one who instigates the activities ("But I think that it's about the priest who can talk to people and involve them, when the communication is working well", "the priest is such an engine in the parish, it wouldn't work without him", "so, various priests come and initiate the activities") or at least do not obstruct them. However, he can be the one who ignores the activities or forbids them ("I'm happy we have a priest who doesn't obstruct our activities, because it is then going well. I have an experience with a priest who obstructed them",

31 If we understand theology as "speaking about God".

“so, I impose on him all the time and I’m really fed up with it because he just turns his back to me and I don’t want to push him that much, so I don’t know what to do”, “I really understand you, I have the same experience that the priest doesn’t care for me”). The group also reflects on the real possibility that there will not be many priests in the future and the laypeople will have to work without them (“parish life doesn’t depend only on the priest, he is just one part”, “because the priest will not visit the parish very often and all will be up to the laypeople”).

The next category is *integrity of community*. It is a large category. Most of the participants consider the parish to be their community and also the place of their activities (“there I saw that a part of the parish works in a different way – there are things to be organized and it is working well so I got inside it and could get involved with the real parish stuff”). The parish is in some cases alive and working well but in other cases it is almost dead and the layperson tries to resuscitate it. The experience of a living community could be also an impulse for other laity activities (“when the community works well and there are people and opportunities to get involved, people will do it, so we have to create the living communities”). Two participants talked about their experience of Church movements (Focolare and Neocatechumenal Way) where they felt the communion and it was a determinative factor for their activities in the Church and outside it (“my husband invited me to the community of Neocatechumenal Way, all the family and the community gives me everything I need and I live my faith there and I try all the time to pass on that faith to my parish where the people only visit church every Sunday”). The community provides the laypeople not only space for their activities but also feedback (“I’m in a perfect parish where everything is working well but I often got such blame that I was really ashamed and I wouldn’t have realised it just by myself”).

The category *dynamics of the laity* includes mainly the actual self-construction of the participants or their view to the future. The laypeople try to read the signs of the time, they realize that the laity is about to be more important soon and they have bigger responsibility and influence (“I think that the laypeople are on the increase, at least it is my opinion, we start to realize that the parishes are not only up to the priest, but he is only one part of it”, “because the parishes will be united and there will be many changes and everything will be up to the laypeople, you will lead the Service of the Word”). Their importance is increasing mainly at the peripheries (“I think there will be an increased demand for the laypeople in the villages as the priest won’t visit them very often but they will have to change somehow”). The participants do not often meet such animosity in their surroundings as before but maybe indifference or a slight concern.³²

32 An objection can be raised that the laypeople do not mention their unique identity, which is described in post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici* (CL) and is based on the fact that each Christian as an individual is “unique and irrepeatable” (CL 28). However, the group, in general does not mention its identity this way and mostly talks about their activities in the parish.

The last category is called *Church circumstances* and it is strongly connected with the category tiredness. Some of the participants have an experience of non-acceptance from the priests or other parishioners. Their lay-formed activities are prevented or forbidden. They also talk about fighting for their activities sometimes ("Because it costs so much effort sometimes"). One participant describes her laity as an "active rebellion in the Church" ("I'm not an active layperson, I'm an active rebel, which is such a perfect position but I still go against the wall").

Relations between the categories and their interpretation

The mutual relations between the categories will be discussed in this part, which will clarify even more the answer to the research question: *What is the mission of the layperson in his own point of view?* The participants of the focus group find their mission mainly in the activities within the Church. They want to develop the integrity of the communities they are active in or those that need to be revived. The other important mission is to pass on the faith to their children. The researched laypeople are often alone in their activities within the parish, and they sharply perceive the difference between themselves – the active ones – and the rest of the parishioners – the passive laypeople. However, they refuse to judge more those who are not active. The research participants who come from the parishes that are working well tend to involve more people in the activities as everyone is supposed to give his talents for the benefits of the community according to their point of view. The priest has an immense importance for their activities. He is the one who initiates and lead the activities but is often the one who is not interested or creates obstacles. The lay activities are very practical and are mostly related to the working of the parish and liturgical services. It means it is about help for the priest. The laypeople find their activities meaningful and it is also an obligation related to their faith according to their point of view. They also talk about tiredness and burn-out when their work is not successful or it is not accepted by the priest or other parishioners. They find it important not to give up and to be humble. What drives their work? There is a turning point at the beginning – a massive change in their life which started their lay activities. This change is related to a radical conversion or a shift from a child faith to an adult faith. The faith is really in the first place – as a lively relationship with God whose will is to be fulfilled and the lay activities should be in compliance with it. The Spirit of God is the one who leads and shows what to do or not. In the second place is the community. The experience of community and a communal sharing of faith of those who "take the gospel seriously" is the impulse to pass on the experience (however, still mostly within the parish). Activities outside the parish are mentioned but the researched laypeople do not do these (at least primarily)

as much as the work within the parish. On the practical level the laypeople talk about evangelization at work or in their neighbourhood by the testimony of their own life or parish activities focused on non-religious people (concerts, Night of the Churches³³), while on the theoretical level they emphasise engagement in public sphere, environmentally responsible behaviour or business based on morality. Two laymen had experience with being a representative in local politics, both interpreting it to be a very negative experience which discouraged them. The group agrees that engagement in the public sphere demands personal bravery and talents in this area. They also find education important for evangelization. They lack the education and appreciate the course and its content. They see their mission to the future to be even more important since there will be a lack of priests and they will have to do more functions in their parishes. The research participants also talk about their environment being less hostile than in the past. However, they do not agree on there being a slight interest or ignorance and indifference.

If we look more carefully at the category *turning point*, it contains some interesting information. The analysis of particular research participants shows that the character of the turning point influences the laity behaviour in the future. The people whose turning point was affected by a priest tend to be rather led by a priest in their activities, and they are more loyal and less critical towards them. The laypeople whose turning point was not affected in this way are more independent and more critical. A similar situation can be in the role of the community. The laypeople who have an intensive experience with a community (parish or movement) that is working well consider it to be a crucial part of their faith, so they want to give testimony about it and bring along or involve other people in it. A very different proportion between the social (communional) and individual dimension of faith has been found in the results, which should be investigated more, for instance from the psychological position.

The next category which I would like to reflect upon more is the category of *community*. The research participants who come from well-functioning parishes have a longing for giving testimony about it and involving other (non-active) parishioners as already mentioned above. However, the range of their activities was, in the vast majority, limited to the parish. The main objective of the laity, in simple terms, was to enliven even more their well-functioning parish to be a lively, joyful and working community where the people know each other, have good relationships, pray together and live with Jesus: a community where everyone is active according to his talents. Evangelization outside the Church was hardly mentioned by these laypeople. Is it possible that the integrated community tends to close up instead of opening doors and windows to the entire world as the Second Vatican Council teaches? We cannot take this fact generally, but it has to be accepted as a possible pastoral problem.

33 Once a year Czech churches and chapels, congregations and orders welcome visitors in open churches with a rich evening programme all over the country.

The activities inside the communities are various and the research participants spend a lot of time doing them, being mostly those who no longer have a family obligation. These activities are placed first; they are the objective of their lay-ness. These activities give them meaning. No one talks about the outside activities as meaningful for him and no one is devoted to them, if we disregard the regular visiting of ill people (mostly older parishioners) by two men from the same parish. The exception is also a laywoman from the Neocatechumenal movement who tries to proclaim the gospel in various places. The fear of evangelization is maybe due to a lack of education that the laypeople experience. In their words, they are aware of answering difficult questions. The fear of evangelization could also be typical of the Czech character.³⁴

Discussion

This part will be mostly dedicated to the reflection of the methodology of the research. In contradiction to Morgan's rule for the focus group, it is a fact that the researcher knew the participants of the research and the participants knew each other. The group was comprised by some members of a two-year course for active people, which was organized by the Theological Faculty. The group participants were students of two different classes of the course. It should also be noted that the research participants felt very influenced by the course and tend to relate some of the research answers to the course and also evaluate the course.

While preparing the research I considered two facts which fundamentally influenced my decision of using this sample of participants. Firstly, Czech Catholic believers usually have difficulties talking about their faith outside their own community and often even inside it. This fact is based on my knowledge of the Czech Catholic milieu and my experience from a few small pieces of research I have conducted recently. It could be assumed that the group where the participants know each other and have a common experience of the course, which moreover included learning by experiential learning, would be more open to the interview and the interaction. The second fact refers to the research question: *What is the mission of the layperson in his own point of view?* The course students, being active laypeople in their parishes, seemed to be an ideal group which would find the research question interesting and would talk willingly about their experience as laypeople. Moreover, these people were members of different parishes around the diocese of České Budějovice and it was far above the limits of a single researcher to search for another sample all over the diocese without participating in a larger project. It should be therefore mentioned that a different sample might create different results. However, it

34 See a similar category in the research of Ludmila Muchová. MUCHOVÁ, L.: Učitel náboženství – misionář a evangelizátor, ale i profesionál a expert. Především však křesťan prožívající hluboký niterný vztah k Bohu skrze Krista. In: *Caritas et Veritas*. Vol. 7, no. 2, 2017.

is not the qualitative researcher's responsibility to generalize. "Their responsibility is to provide as rich and thick a description of the situation as possible. Perhaps the doubts over generalizability can be moved on if we think of terms *identification* and *resonance*. Qualitative research should resonate with the experiences of others in similar circumstances. This resonance should invoke a sense of identification with those who share something of the experience."³⁵

The role and the position of the researcher should be also described. The researcher knew all the participants from the course and a few of them from their own parish. This has an advantage in that the group was more open towards the researcher and it was easier to lead the interview but there was a thread of bias during the analysis and interpretation of the research. This is the reason why I use the possibility of an independent validation of the gained categories by an expert for the qualitative research.

Ideal versus praxis

The aspects of the ideal type of layperson should be recalled. In this point of view, the layperson is obedient to his spiritual shepherd and cooperates with his priest. He is well formed in this faith and well educated for his apostolate. The main objective of his apostolate is activity outside the Church – he is supposed to proclaim the gospel and sanctify the world around him by his work and be engaged in various spheres of the public space, and do charity work or at least support it. Another important field is also family life. The layperson should live a proper life and witness by their lives about the importance of the Christian family, pass on the faith to his children and help other families in need. Helping the priest is obviously required but it is not the entire mission. Before confronting the ideal with the praxis, I would like to mention once again that the results of the research are not general results for the Czech Catholic Church. The focus group offers a deeper and potentially valuable insight into one group of laypeople in the diocese of České Budějovice. The results show a particular view within the laity, which should be considered in the pastoral reality.

First of all, it is necessary to point out the similarities of the ideal with the praxis. The laypeople cooperate in the organization and pastoral activities in the parish. They work together with the priest, with whom some of the participants have good relations. They are firmly rooted in their communities and in the Church. They are very loyal to the priest, even to those with whom they have problems. No one has a tendency to leave the Church or criticize much. According to the ideal, they find it important to live their faith in their families: in married life or in passing on their faith to the children. They tend to care for their faith and live in harmony with the will of God. They let the Holy Spirit

35 SWINTON, J., MOWAT, H.: *Practical Theology and qualitative research*, pp. 44 – 45.

lead their lives. They find it crucial to search for concordance between their life and their faith. What are the differences? The most substantial contradiction is between the ideal of outside activity and the praxis – the internal activity. It is clear that the laypeople are active and have initiative in their parishes. They put this activity in the first place. They partially talk about outside work but do not reflect upon (or not even know) the varied field of possible activities. Engagement in the public sphere discourages them or they would rather leave it up to those who have the necessary talent for it. They try to evangelize by their own life example but the ideal talks about a more active approach. Another sphere missed here is the field of charity. Only one participant of the focus group talked about his visiting of the ill as his main lay activity. No one else mentioned any other charity activity. Is it to be related only to the lack of education and formation which was detected in the results or is it a deeper problem? Besides problem-free cooperation with the priest, the results also showed an important disharmony when the priest did not support or even made obstacles to the lay activities. The laypeople however continued with their activities. Generally, it is possible to say facing the ideal that the main asset of the explored laypeople is loyalty to the Church and priests despite occasional disharmony. An asset is also their care for their families and communities, as well as their lively faith and desire to be active in the Church. However, there is an unsatisfactory approach to evangelization, which is supposed to be the main mission of the Church, and also charity. There is a lack of education as well but the group is interested in fixing this. This seems to be a good message.

Conclusion

The aim of the paper was to compare the theological conception of the lay apostolate and their own self-perception. There was a theological ideal on one side constructed out of the Second Vatican Council documents and the results from the qualitative research using the technique of a focus group on the other side. These results cannot be generalized but they present a useful insight into the phenomenon of the laity in the Czech Catholic Church.³⁶ The results of the focus group are composed of 15 categories: we versus they, turning point, practical aspects of the laity definition, leadership, inner activity, outside activity, meaningfulness, family, education, tiredness, faith, role of the priest, integrity of community, dynamics of the laity and Church circumstances. These categories were possible to interpret and use for comparison with the ideal type of the layperson. It emerged that the explored laypeople are very loyal to the Church, they care much about their families and passing on the faith within them. They are also very active in their parishes. They are not easily discouraged by other parishioners or priests. They care for their

³⁶ See discussion for more explanation and the footnote 35.

faith and try to live according to God's will, so they let the Holy Spirit lead them. This is all in concordance with the ideal type of laity. It appears that the laypeople are not very aware of their responsibility for the world: for active evangelization, sanctifying the world in all of its areas and charity work. It is possible that they are too busy with their activities within their communities. They fear evangelization and engagement in the public sphere. They find it to be a very difficult task for which they are not well educated or they lack the necessary talents. Their attempts at engagement in local politics are regarded negatively. In spite of it, the research showed that the course at least opened their eyes in the question of evangelization. Another important fact is that charity work is almost not mentioned and it is one of the realization functions of the Church. The field of evangelization and charity activities is an important area which should be more emphasised among the laypeople or turn education in the Catholic Church towards these activities. If we want an open Church, which comes out of herself in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, it is necessary to educate and encourage the laypeople to work outside the Church. Otherwise, it is possible that Church communities will close up even more and the Holy Spirit will blow beyond them.

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List of abbreviations

AA	<i>Apostolicam actuositatem</i>
CL	<i>Christifideles laici</i>
GS	<i>Gaudium et spes</i>
LG	<i>Lumen gentium</i>

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