



REV. WŁADYSŁAW WYSZOWADZKI

The Polish University Abroad in London

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4410-0188> * e-mail: w.wyszowadzki@pcmew.org

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THE CHURCH IN THE FACE OF THE CHALLENGES OF THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA

Abstract

The purpose of the research is to analyze the situation of the Church and pastoral care in the post-pandemic reality. The experience of the 2020-2022 period shows that there has been a strengthening of the faith attitudes of Catholics actively participating in the life of the Church. At the same time, the weaker sides of pastoral care, resulting from confrontation with the media world, have shown themselves. This calls for using the experience of people of science, medicine, bioethics, psychology in the pastoral model. Pastoral activity should also value sacramental pastoral care with the Eucharist at the center. New challenges also face pastoral theology, whose research results can be used to seek new ways of carrying out salvific mission and evangelization.

Keywords: coronavirus pandemic, virtual world, online liturgy, Internet pastoral care, pastoral theology

KOŚCIÓŁ WOBEC WYZWAŃ EPOKI POSTPANDEMICZNEJ

Abstrakt

Celem badań jest przeanalizowanie sytuacji Kościoła i duszpasterstwa w postpandemicznej rzeczywistości. Doświadczenie okresu 2020-2022 pokazuje, że nastąpiło wzmocnienie postaw wiary katolików czynnie uczestniczących w życiu Kościoła. Jednocześnie pokazały się słabsze strony duszpasterstwa, wynikające z konfrontacji ze światem medialnym. Wymaga to wykorzystania w modelu duszpasterskim doświadczenia ludzi nauki, medycyny, bioetyki, psychologii. W działalności pastoralnej należy również dowartościować duszpasterstwo sakramentalne z Eucharystią w centrum. Nowe wyzwania stoją również przed teologią pastoralną, której wyniki badań mogą zostać wykorzystane do poszukiwania nowych sposobów realizowania misji zbawczej i ewangelizacji.

Słowa kluczowe: pandemia koronawirusa, świat wirtualny, liturgia online, duszpasterstwo internetowe, teologia pastoralna

INTRODUCTION

The Church, although it has consistently carried out the mission given to her by Christ for two thousand years, has constantly faced challenges carried by the tides of history. Wars, schisms, epidemics – these are trials from which the Church has always emerged stronger, although the situations were not immediately depicted brightly. It took time to understand the supernatural and providential work of the Holy Spirit. Certain historical events confronted the Church with intractable challenges and complex questions, the answers to which came at councils, synods and in academic debates. Modern times are not significantly different in the scale of challenges from what the Church has faced in the past. The question that should be asked, however, is – do we have ideas on how to face the next challenge posed by the coronavirus pandemic crisis, and has the Church responded to the challenge as best it could? On the one hand, the situation has unveiled new pastoral opportunities, but also, unfortunately, dangers.

1. THE PASTORAL CRISIS OF THE DIGITAL AGE

Much is heard today about the crisis in the Church (Ratzinger 1986; Hildebrandt 2000; Martin 2021; Ratzinger 1992; Kasper and Moltmann 2005; Skrzypczak 2011)¹. This crisis unfolds into many components – the attrition of the younger generation, apostasy, morality scandals, accusations of a lack of openness to modern ideological thought, or a lack of openness to those of the LGBTQ+ community. It is alleged – perhaps rightly so – that the modern era and the pace of change have left the Church with its thought and teaching far behind. The non-church circles often use slick rhetoric according to which the Church's doctrine, in the face of the progress of civilization, has become outdated in many points and inadequate to the needs and expectations of modern man. The situation of crisis, however, goes far beyond the Church itself and permeates numerous spheres of human life today. An existential crisis, an economic crisis, an energy crisis, a crisis in diplomatic relations between states, or a crisis in the arts are just some examples. Crisis generally permeates modern culture and the world. There is friction inside and outside the Church and strong polemics about her teaching, which some believe should be revised. As always, one can very firmly insist that these and similar opinions are being put forward wrongly, nevertheless, one should consider whether in fact the Church's teaching is still defensible, since faith is increasingly being replaced by "knowledge" and "science." We deliberately put these terms in quotation marks, because according to the tools of sound science, not everything

¹ The issue of the crisis of the Church is being addressed by a number of analysts, philosophers and theologians. Also noteworthy is the meeting convened by Pope Francis of the Presidents of Bishops' Conferences from around the world on the crisis of faith and the Church (21-24.02.2019), as well as the study of the topic published in the form of a letter by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in May 2019.

that is promoted today under the banner of knowledge and science falls into these categories. Indeed, the simplest definition, provided in the Dictionary of the Polish Language, reads as follows:

“[Science is – W.W.] a set of views that constitute a systematized whole and are part of a specific research discipline” (Dictionary).

A broader and more precise definition is given by the Cambridge Dictionary:

“(knowledge from) the careful study of the structure and behavior of the physical world, especially by watching, measuring, and doing experiments, and the development of theories to describe the results of these activities: *pure/applied science, recent developments in science and technology, Space travel is one of the marvels/wonders of modern science*” (Cambridge Dictionary).

The definition in the British source uses several important phrases: “careful study”, “watching”, “measuring”, “doing experiments,” “developments in science.” These indicate the need for empirically measurable, time-spanning, meticulous and careful scientific processes. In the case of the coronavirus pandemic, which we will be looking at in the context of pastoral challenges, certain “scientific” activities seemed to fall short of all the necessary conditions, and in view of this, for this type of “science” a more adequate defining criterion would be one of the classifications found in the PWN Encyclopedia:

“The ideological aspect [of science – W.W.]. The results of scientific research may be used or promoted or suppressed depending on the worldview adhered to by groups with power and influence in society, e.g., fragments of research are presented to the public before they are scientifically verified; some sciences are denied scientific status on the grounds that they are irrational (with a loose understanding of the concept of rationality); such an approach is characteristic especially of totalitarian systems, e.g. Communist ideologues in the Stalinist period undermined the scientific nature of cybernetics and genetics of G.J. Mendel, considered logic, sociology and psychological tests as tools of ideological influence of the bourgeoisie, while they accepted the pseudo-scientific theory of T. Lysenko. At the time, ideological considerations determined the directions and scope of research in many scientific disciplines, especially history, economics, demography, legal studies, religious studies and empirical research” (*PWN Encyclopedia*).

In analyzing the situation of the Church in the post-pandemic era, let us leave aside strictly medical, scientific and pseudo-scientific issues, as well as the final judgment on the quality of the scientific research conducted on vaccination and pandemics – this is not the axis of this study. We will focus on the pastoral and theological aspects that should respond to the unprecedented intra- and extra-ecclesial phenomena that we could witness in a period of several months at the turn of 2020-2022 (*PWN Encyclopedia*).

The fact that the Church's doctrine cannot be changed – especially in the area of dogma and morality – we will not discuss here, since as a *sine qua non* we accept the teachings of Christ and Tradition, strong as a rock for centuries – at least until the 20th century. The second half of the last century and the beginning of the 21st century, as is not difficult to see, seem to be playing with the teaching of Christ. This fact is pointed out by Ralph Martin (Martin 2021):

“The ‘modernist’ controversy rooted in the desire to adapt Revelation to the culture or prevailing philosophical currents that historicize and relativize the whole faith has bubbled to the surface time and again.” Discussion of legitimate notions of “living tradition” or “doctrinal development” can provide an opportunity for these legitimate notions to disguise efforts to depart from tradition or change doctrine (Martin 2021, 41).

Certainly, the cultural phenomena of the 1960s, among them the revolution in morals and later the increased influence of socialist thought especially in the Eastern Bloc countries, as well as the controversial reception of the Vatican Council, gradually influenced a change in human religious sensitivity. However, the real pace of change in attitudes toward God, faith and the Church came with the increasing affluence of societies in the Western world and growing consumerism. Man has apparently begun to believe that everything can ultimately be bought and God is no longer useful for achieving happiness. Even in the minds of many Christians, a dangerous new paradigm has begun to come to the fore, proclaiming that “happiness without God could be attainable.” These beliefs seem to circle back to ancient pagan concepts of thought rooted in the philosophy of Aristippus of Cyrene, or Epicurus of Samos. The doctrine of the hedonists was simple and clear: the only happiness in human life is pleasure, and the consequence of such a thesis in a great simplification is a morality based on the principle – pleasure is good, and pain and what is unpleasant is bad. Hedonistic thought found good ground in positive psychology² through Martin Seligman (Seligman 2002; 2011) and has evolved in our time under the influence of complex economic and cultural phenomena into materialistic hedonism, which we would otherwise describe as consumerism. The centrifugal tendencies in the Church toward empiricism, rationalism and hedonism have been further reinforced in our time by genetic engineering, experiments on human embryos, in vitro procedures, cosmetic surgery, scientific advances and the redefinition of such values as happiness, love and family. There is no shortage of positive opinions among churchmen on

² This is known as psychological hedonism, which states that man desires happiness. However, this current does not indicate exactly how a person can achieve this happiness. Seligman points to 3 aspects: pleasure, commitment to action and a sense of meaning from the actions taken in life. According to these assumptions, a person would feel happy. Seligman's concept does not deal with such existential challenges as suffering, incurable illness and death. From a theological perspective, Seligman's concept devalues itself in the face of difficult experiences, referred to as “cross” or “trial,” which shows that a person's happiness lies quite elsewhere.

artificial insemination, women's right to abortion, euthanasia or the blessing of same-sex couples. The Church Pandemic crisis has only solidified the generally shaky religious condition of man, which was not born in an instant under the influence of the pandemic itself. The process of Catholics cooling in their faith and secularizing their views has been going on for a long time, but it certainly does not affect everyone. There are church circles where the faith of individuals is uplifting and inspiring. There are greater doubts in the faith of those who are fed not only the Truth proclaimed from the pulpit, but also other "truths" and half-truths proclaimed from the "pulpit" of the media. So when one talks about the crisis of the Church it is worth pointing out, in addition to the glaring negatives, and the less noticeable at first glance positive aspects, because despite everything the Church continues to bear fruit and her vitality does not expire, she undergoes at most a qualitative change. This means that Christianity has a timeless and imperishable value. The only thing to look for today is new ideas and tools, thanks to which it would be possible to reach even better with the Gospel message to the computerized and desacralized mentality of modern man.

2. NEW AGGIORNAMENTO?

Assuming that the core of Catholic morality and dogma must not be violated, one would wonder if there are areas of pastoral practice that could be flexibly adapted to the needs of new times without harming doctrine. Vatican II showed that this is possible and aggiornamento can bear good fruit – as long as its framework is not taken too casually and exceptions to the norm do not become the rule. Some six decades have passed since Vatican II. This is little and much at the same time. The passage of time was probably felt differently by generations born at the beginning of the 20th century, when the pace of technological and scientific advances was much slower compared to what we experience today. The pace of change, for example, in the area of work on artificial intelligence, or in the aforementioned genetic engineering, is so tremendous that one actually has the impression that, except for specialists in these fields and enthusiasts of novelties, most people are somehow lagging behind. Nevertheless, it is in times of this rapid progress that we have come to live. Progress in itself is neither bad nor good. It has no moral value. It acquires it depending on what intention a person gives it. It can lead to destruction, as shown by the capabilities of modern nuclear weapons, but it can also help carry out ever more precise surgical procedures and thus help man recover better. So it is man, not technology, that decides between good and evil. If the modern world does not understand in time that the only hope for our civilization is to return to the formation of human consciences, the consequence not difficult to predict will be a regressive decline of humanity and a return to the primitive behavior inherent in primitive peoples and animals. For without conscience there is no morality, and since there is no morality, there is no right and wrong – and therefore everything is possible and permissible – violence,

war, rape, exploitation, or plunder. In a way, we are already witnessing this fact, observing the current events in Ukraine and elsewhere on the globe, where the only argument in support of force and power is a show of military force. As the Church, we have less and less influence in shaping attitudes and consciences. Additionally, we have found ourselves in a new position during the pandemic. The pressing need of the times in the face of all that we have said so far is to revise pastoral methods. The question arises as to whether the model of pastoral care sketched out in the 1960s by the Council Fathers and after the Council by such charismatic figures as Wojtyła, for example, or Blachnicki, the founder of the Światło-Życie Movement (Paluch 1998; Dziecioł 1996; Brodzki and Wojna 1988), is still in any way compatible with the mentality and needs of man in the digital age, or is it already an obsolete artifact, increasingly less useful and less effective? Perhaps we need to face the question of what this “new evangelization” encouraged by John Paul II should be, and what shape should contemporary pastoral ministry take? Blachnicki’s vision, although growing out of the realities of the Polish Church, correlates in an amazing way with the vision of St. Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer (1902-1975), who launched Opus Dei in Spain in the 1920s (Tourneau 2004). Escriva emphasized the issue of holiness as a universal vocation addressed by God to every Christian – regardless of profession or condition. In doing so, he reversed the erroneous pre-Second Vatican doctrine of clerical and religious circles that the priestly or religious path would lead more effectively to holiness than the lay vocation of a mother or father raising their children with love. St. Josemaria pointed to lay people’s work, professional and family duties as a tool for sanctification in everyday life:

“Do you really want to achieve holiness? – Fulfill the small duties of each moment: do what you should, focused on what you are doing” (Escriva de Balaguer 815).

Both Spanish and Polish work focuses on the in-depth formation of lay people and grounding them in the faith. In their program assumptions, the visions of Escriva and Blachnicki differ both structurally and in terms of formation tools. The goals, however, are similar: *primo* – to form mature circles of lay people who will be able to assist the Church and pastors competently in proclaiming the Good News to the world, *secundo* – to assist people on their path to holiness. While Opus Dei received a unique status from the Church, becoming a personal prelature supported by the popes (John Paul II 1982), the Światło-Życie Movement is unclear why it rather remained a local movement with less apostolic momentum. Perhaps Blachnicki’s vision today would need only minor programming revisions and greater patronage from the hierarchy of the Polish Church in order to rouse the younger generations with renewed vigor? The question remains open. Certainly, however, above all the crises mentioned above is the greatest of all crises – the crisis of holiness, and it is this crisis that is responsible for the scandals occurring in the Church, poor quality pastoral care, the departure of the faithful, or the lack of vocations.

3. TENSION BETWEEN FIDES AND RATIO

Although it seems obvious, we need to be reminded from time to time that scientific progress and the achievements of medicine, physics, astronomy have never been treated as threats by the Church. Quite the contrary. It was in the circles of Church universities and monasteries that scientific thought developed, starting from the Anselmian paradigm of *fides quarens intellectum*. From the dawn of the Church's history, faith and reason have been the hallmark of the fact that Christianity is not a magical religion, but a hard-headed one. John Paul II reminded us of this in his encyclical *Fides et ratio* (1998). Invoking the authority of the great scholastics, the Polish Pope encourages us to look to Aquinas' teaching for inspiration in the search for truth. St. Thomas' *Quinque Viae* was to teach the world for many centuries that the Church reads God from the laws of nature and physics. The diad of Fides et Ratio was to protect the teaching of Christ from distortions and the dangerous shifting of emphasis too much on fides or too much on ratio. Neither extreme has ever worked out well for the Church, and it has often had to return to the wisdom of the Aristotelian principle of the golden mean, which says that anything exaggerated to one side or the other moves away from virtue. There has been no shortage of crises in the history of the Church when one of these wings was overexposed.

Consequently, there were such serious crises that they ended in schisms or the perpetuation of heresy. When we look at the phenomena present in the Church today, and exacerbated by the Coronavirus pandemic, we see how the old tension between fides and ratio is once again gaining strength. The tension is so strong that it is beginning to lead to a dangerous polarization of circles extremely far apart within the Church itself. The drama of the separation between faith and reason was already hinted at by John Paul II more than twenty years ago (John Paul II 1998, 45-48). On the one hand, one can see a strong fideistic wing that prefers to see in psychological science, medicine, or virology the tools of the globalists to seize human freedom. In this way, extremely fanatical circles have been strengthened, proclaiming that strong faith is a remedy for everything and, consequently, is also a completely sufficient means of, for example, defeating a coronavirus pandemic. Such a view carries the danger of falling into increasing irrationality and absurd inference, completely detached from Thomas' principle of *gratia supponit naturam*. Pastors and the faithful who profess the absolute primacy of faith over reason seem to forget that God comes to help through man to man. The danger of pastoralism conducted in this way reassures the susceptible faithful that medicine and doctors are a threat or not needed at all, since it is only God who can miraculously heal and protect man from viruses or disease. On the other hand, in the tensions on the level of *fides et ratio*, there is another extreme, equally risky for the Church. This is the arm of pastors and the faithful going to extremes to rationalize certain phenomena. "Rationalists" of the Church, as well

demonstrated by the pandemic crisis, went hand in hand with so-called “science,” which, in the opinion of many commentators, still raised too many controversies and questions to be accepted without reservation. These “pro-science” church circles believed so much in the media narrative and the opinions of “experts” that the word of “scientists” became for a good few months the ultimate determinant for pastoral care, a word clearly more important than the Word of God and the command to *go into all the world and preach the gospel*. The Lord God was thus taken out of the picture for a while, the religious needs of the people suspended by government decrees, the celebration of the sacraments restricted or stopped altogether. Holy water, in accordance with the directives of experts, disappeared from the churches, distances and limits of the faithful were ordered, the liturgy was moved into virtual space, and sacramental communion was replaced by spiritual communion. It has clearly become a disturbing phenomenon that some church circles have paid more attention to health, vaccinations and urging the faithful to avoid social contact than to spreading the hope that comes from faith. The great tragedy for many infected and dying in hospital wards was that they were deprived of the sacraments – including the last confession and viaticum. “Fideists,” as a sign of defiance in the face of such painful situations, ostentatiously violated emergency regulations, eager to prove that faith would protect them from infection. Today we know how many of them were wrong. “Rationalists,” on the other hand, went to the other extreme, excessive conservatism and exaggerated caution at times. What has this experience shown? That, on the one hand, there is in man a very strong need for God, attachment to tradition, respect for the sacred and a spirit of resistance in defense of the highest values. On the other hand, there is a crisis of faith and the placing of physical health as the highest value. Have certain circles of the Church forgotten that more than “food and clothing” (cf. Matthew 6) one should strive for the salvation of the soul and the role of pastoral care is not to enter into dialogue with the world, but to lead people to holiness and salvation? Is it permissible to bracket the teachings of Christ in certain circumstances? It seems that yes. The pandemic and post-pandemic period only sealed a certain direction built up over the years, the motto of which would be Christianity without the cross. There are movements in the Church that are trying to present a vision of a happy, joyful Christianity. The subject of suffering, the cross and illness is taboo in these movements. Are we dealing with some form of Christian hedonism? How else can we explain the huge scale of religious and charismatic happenings, where the main theme is not Christ, but the healing of man from ailments, diseases and suffering, the search for aesthetic sensations – that is, the pursuit of earthly happiness, contentment and essentially pleasure? Where in such a pastoral model is there room for Christ suffering and teaching: “*Whoever wants to follow me, let him take up his cross and follow me*”? Do we really want a Church without a cross, and if without a cross then also without a sacrifice? It is not difficult to understand that such thinking is a road to nowhere. Sadly, the Protestantization of the Catholic

Church is a process that today is blasting it from within in a particularly powerful way through circles fascinated by pentacostal movements. Religious emotional experiences built with appropriately stimulating music and chants seem to mean more than adoring in silence the Lord Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and the Sacraments themselves. What has happened that the emphasis is shifting for us from the Sacrament of Confession and the Eucharist to services of healing of soul and body? The experience of the moment and the stimuli for modern man are more important than the Church's assurance that the sacrament gives everything necessary for salvation. Perhaps this "tuning in" to sensations and experiences are one of the reasons why the move of the liturgy into the virtual space of the Internet has not been much of a problem for so many people. Since the Mass can't provide a strong emotional experience, what difference does it make whether one is in church or watching it through a screen? So, whatever one may say about the attitudes of the radical "fideists" of the pandemic time who fought for the right to participate in the liturgy and sacraments – they undoubtedly gave a bold, though perhaps not always fully reasonable, testimony of faith in the omnipotence of God's power, while the extremely rational attitudes of others exposed a serious crisis of human faith and the placing of too much trust in the authority of "science" and the media. Added to this was the usual human convenience and comfort of not leaving home, blessed by the Church. So here we had a clash of two paths leading to happiness: the path of uncompromising faith in God, firmly rejecting the voice of science, and the path of conformity, hedonism and faith in health – as guarantors of the goal.

4. THE MOST HOLY SACRAMENT OR THE TELEVISION?

Comparing the trial of faith of the 21st century with other epidemics that happened in Europe in the past, we can easily see that in the past, when health and life were threatened, churches were opened wide, the faithful were gathered by the Blessed Sacrament to place their hope in God. The situation with the coronavirus showed quite the opposite trend. Churches were closed and people were gathered not in front of the Blessed Sacrament, but in front of TV sets to feed them with statistics of infections and deaths. The purpose of our reflection, however, is not to evaluate one or the other position, but rather to ask – what do these experiences teach us? The fact that a significant part of pastoral activities, including liturgical life, has moved into virtual space has shown that the Church can adapt to new conditions in a very malleable way, so there are no grounds for considering modern pastoral work as completely unsuited to the requirements of the modern world. Many church communities, thanks to the zoom platform and Internet connections, were able to maintain ties with each other during the period of isolation, taking advantage of the new opportunity to participate in formation programs. Even the liturgy made available through the YouTube channel could give the faithful

the strength to endure difficult times in isolation – although it was known that the Eucharist reaching homes virtually could never replace a live encounter with God in the temple. Unfortunately, the practice of participating in the Eucharist in front of a TV or computer monitor has been embraced by many people quite enthusiastically as an equally valuable alternative to traditional participation in the liturgy in the temple. Despite the removal of pandemic restrictions, a significant number of people never returned to the Church to experience the Eucharist in the community of the faithful. A recent study conducted at a church of the Polish Catholic Mission in the UK (Wyszowadzki 2022)³ shows that after the pandemic, some people, depending on their mood or well-being, go to church once, while at other times they follow the Sunday Eucharist online. This generally applies to people over the age of 70, although young people also appeared in the category of people surveyed. The same study showed that nearly 23% of the faithful have permanently disappeared from the church. The reason for this cannot be clearly determined, while it is assumed that there could have been at least two reasons. The first related to the return of Poles from emigration to Poland after years spent abroad. The second reason could be related to a crisis of faith that had been building up for months or even years, with the pandemic becoming a useful catalyst to facilitate a break in ties with the Church. This category of respondents generally includes believers not involved in parish movements, prayer groups or communities. The hope is that while the total faithful of the church surveyed (Local Polish Catholic Mission – London, Balham) has depleted to some extent, parish communities have maintained their vitality and even increased slightly in membership. Some of the parish groups have strengthened in numbers and developed new evangelization or charity initiatives. The balance of the study is thus not as gloomy as one might have assumed at first glance. Certainly, the quality of post-pandemic pastoral care has changed. Those who are lukewarm in faith and undecided have left, while those who are committed and belong to prayer communities have strengthened. This does not change the fact that, generally speaking, we have not yet come to grips as a Church with online celebrations. To some extent, the faithful have lost the ability to discern between live participation in Mass with the reception of the sacrament from virtual participation. Why is this happening? We have already partially answered this question. Perhaps one of the other reasons is the progress of civilization, which has shown and is increasingly proving that life today can successfully proceed simultaneously on two levels – not only in a real way, but also on a virtual level. The two realities now intermingle so much that it is already difficult to distinguish – whether it is more real when people meet in a physical way or when they communicate through social media. The modern generation has become accustomed to both forms becoming the norm. Through online platforms

³ The study used questionnaires and also compared statistics from 2019 and 2022. The number of believers, the number of baptisms, weddings, funerals were compared. Pastoral initiatives from both periods were compared.

we communicate, send letters, talk, learn, study. So why shouldn't the Church function in virtual space? – more than one person will probably ask.

5. YOUTH ON THE PERIPHERY OF THE CHURCH

The young generation seems to be the most unsuited to the old form of transmission of the Good News. It is they who are most likely to erase the value of the Church and commit apostasy. A real scourge of recent years is the mass unsubscribing of young people from religious lessons. Following modern trends, of which hedonism, consumerism, materialism, or genderism, the young are discovering that they are more attractive and appealing than the “old-fashioned” teaching of the Church, “stigmatizing the right to pleasure,” “discriminating against people of a different sexual orientation.” The cult of the body, the pursuit of sensation, pleasure, easy and quick solutions are not compatible with the Church's teaching, which sets the standards high. A useful enough pretext for apostasy for many is a publicized moral scandal allegedly perpetrated from time to time by a clergyman or another ridiculous film. However, the most critical problem of the modern Church is the peculiar stagnation of circles, the lack of constructive ideas for new pastoral initiatives or for a newer model of pastoral care that would show the world anew that Christianity has not aged and can still be an attractive prospect for man. This is what John Paul II attempted to do throughout his priestly and then papal life. He repeated to the young to demand from themselves, even if no one demands from them anymore (John Paul II 1983). He focused on direct contact with people, focused on a conversation that could treat God and values in a non-ecclesial space. Hence canoeing with young people, hiking together in the mountains and traveling abroad. This prophetic sign has not yet been fully read by the Church. Wojtyła had an excellent pastoral sense and knew that not only the pulpit, but any other place could be conducive to the proclamation of the Good News, if only pastoral ministry would get rid of its ossified forms and frameworks, which instead of bringing people closer – paradoxically can distance people from God and the Gospel. What a shock to the Roman Curia was the decision of the Polish Pope that the Head of the Church should begin a pilgrimage to peoples scattered on all continents, or the initiative of World Youth Day. The shepherd did not wait for the sheep, but went to them himself – outside the walls of the Vatican, beyond the walls of the temple. The Polish Pope also surrounded himself with the scientific community, using the professional knowledge of doctors.⁴ It seems that with the death of John Paul II an era has come to an end, and the great opportunities for the renewal of the Church have dimmed. “Generation JP2” is the fruit of this remarkable pontificate, and it is currently still the driving force of the

⁴ Among the prominent authorities in the medical field was Dr. Wanda Póltawska, who shared her scientific and practical experience of psychiatric work with John Paul II for a number of years before his election to the See of Peter in 1978, and later during his pontificate.

Church. However, time passes inexorably, and in a dozen years or so, the Church will be led into new times by the generations that are fleeing it today – usually after confirmation. Pope Francis has tried to signal repeatedly that people cannot be expected to come to Christ on their own. Today, the Church's communities, together with their pastors, should consider the challenge of reaching the man who wanders outside the temple walls. Today, the fields of evangelization are to be the periphery of the Church, and if we do not change pastoral programs in time, in two to three decades the Church will no longer have young people completely in the parishes, not to mention priestly and religious vocations, which are falling dramatically from year to year. Perhaps, then, the new virtual space would not be a bad space at all for developing good evangelization and pastoral ideas for young people, if we helped rediscover the imperishable depth and beauty of the Eucharist lived in a spirit of communal union. But the Internet is not everything. It is only a certain pastoral aid. Even technology cannot replace a real encounter, just as it can never replace God.

6. HOMES A PLACE OF FORMATION

The pandemic has shown that faith can survive even the most difficult trials, and that the place of sanctification can be not only parish churches, but also Christian homes – so perhaps it would be good to support programs aimed at deepening the spiritual and theological formation of mothers and fathers? Returning to Fr. Blachnicki's tools seems reasonable. Faith is born of listening, and the young generation spends the most important years of growing up in the family home. Home churches should teach and educate the younger generation in the spirit of love and responsibility not only for their family, but also for the fate of the Church. Today we have well-educated people in the churches, the level of religious knowledge is increasing thanks to Bible courses and theological studies that are more easily accessible via the Internet. Nevertheless, the Church should invest even more in the in-depth theological formation of the faithful and the ongoing formation of Christian mothers and fathers. Reversing the emphasis of catechization from children to parents seems to be an idea worthy of in-depth reflection. There also needs to be a better balancing of the spiritual element with the rational element. A pastoral ministry with a stable balance, emphasizing both *fides* and *ratio*, will have an even better chance of meeting the challenges of the coming years. Technological progress does not stop. The lay faithful need more and more professional scientific and theological tools to guard their faith and not be deceived by an atheistic narrative that takes only empirical experience as its starting point. The faithful are ready to accept more difficult layers of knowledge, since we have a better educated society today than in the past. Even in non-urban spaces, higher education is becoming the norm. Therefore, the Church should take care to include bioethical, medical, psychological, sociological and other issues in

pastoral programs. With an expanded scientific perspective, 21st century pastoral care will not be left behind and the faithful will be rid of the fear that faith cannot be confronted with science today. This is not only possible, but necessary.

7. THE POWER OF THE MEDIA AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE CROWD

Among the formation methods of the modern people of God, there should be no lack of space for awareness of what are certain psycho- and socio-technical tools by means of which the image of reality in the media and public space is shaped or, more often, even obscured. A Catholic of the 21st century cannot just be an emotional “fideist.” He needs reliable knowledge, and this is the perfect space for a new pastoral ministry. Understanding the world, cultural phenomena, principles and techniques of influencing public opinion – these are now topics that, along with religious content, should be promoted in a very professional manner. The period of the coronavirus pandemic can be an excellent research study for psychologists and sociologists to analyze how the mechanism known as “crowd psychology” and other interesting behavioral mechanisms and reactions to the trauma of the Covid-19 epidemic came into practice (Długosz 2021; *Social Theories* 2009; Sztompka 2020; Sztompka 2005; Strong 1990; Le Bon 2009). These phenomena are known not from today and have found a number of scientific studies. There are several interesting aspects that should not escape the attention of the Church – among them, the specific mechanisms that govern a certain human collective under strictly defined conditions. A key role having a not inconsiderable influence on the change of previous human behavior is strong stress and a sense of danger. A person as an individual is able to give up his own system of beliefs and values if he allows himself to be swept away by the emotions of the collective and accepts, if only temporarily, the new rules shared by others as a certainty. By accepting anonymity in a crowd, a person is ready to do more than as an independent individual. This is because in a crowd, personal responsibility is lost and the sense of power that comes from belonging to a group that acts and thinks according to an externally given narrative comes to the fore. Psychology uses the term “collective wisdom” to describe this phenomenon:

“Human thought mostly follows the line of least resistance; human reason often has a tendency to resort to help from others and books when solving problems. In this may be expressed a subtle instinct for the preservation of strength: mental work is connected with the consumption of physiological energy. If, therefore, a person finds himself in conditions of direct assistance in his mental work on the part of the assembly, it may happen that he relies on other, less capable and rational members of the assembly, whether as a result of the above-mentioned inclination or directly from fatigue or other causes” (Wróblewski 1922, 8).

Thus, it is no longer the individual who thinks independently, but it is the crowd that creates collective “wisdom” – even if it contradicts the common sense

and reason of man as an individual. This curious phenomenon is a good example of why the Church's faithful – before the pandemic, not allowing the possibility of not attending the Sunday Eucharist or saying holy water at the entrance to the temple – changed their attitude during the pandemic without much resistance. Following the collective trend of confining themselves to their homes in front of their televisions for a time, they believed that this was the only right solution. Why the only solution? Because that was the only narrative flowing from the media and the mouths of many pastors. The word wove a new reality, and the image completed the whole. “Unbreakable” habits and principles for generations were bent and changed in a single moment, literally. To this day, many churches no longer have holy water at the door although the pandemic has been called off. The role of the media in these processes of psychological and sociological influence is not insignificant. This raises a legitimate concern about whether editors and reporters are still bound by professional ethics today? How much integrity does a media message carry, and how much manipulation and hypocrisy in it? The Church must face the great challenge of communicating the word in the public space. Already the Greek thinkers, in an era when no one dreamed of television or the Internet, understood that the word has a powerful effect and were able to forge a discipline, called rhetoric. The art of rhetoric allowed politicians to influence the masses very effectively. The power of rhetoric is understood by media circles. With words, truth can be turned into falsehood, and something that is an exception to the norm can be established as the norm. Ideologists build on this. This is how all sorts of “-isms” are born in the public and media space: environmentalism, gentrism, etc. An equally powerful stimulus that has a high power of influence is image. The combination of words and images can create a parallel reality to the actual state of affairs. How, then, would the Church defend Christ's teachings in an apparent clash with the world of anti-church media, operating with such skillful tools as word and image? Perhaps by developing an even more resilient independent Catholic media? Or perhaps by simply not entering into polemics with the world, but focusing on Christ in the Blessed Sacrament?

8. REDISCOVER THE VALUE OF SILENCE

The world and the media offer many stimuli, too many perhaps. These stimuli, often drastic, violent bring anxiety, fear, apprehension. The issue of silence and solitude is addressed by Cardinal Sarah:

“In everyday life, the constant flow of news, meetings, and various types of activity constantly suppresses those voices that hide in the depths of the being, and prevents them from rising to the surface of consciousness. They are revealed by silence and solitude” (Sarah 2017, 320).

Sarah's insights are commented on by Stefaniak, noting the ascetic aspect associated with the virtue of silence. Asceticism, in light of everything we have previously hinted at regarding the trends of modern hedonistic-consumptionist culture, seems an abstract term, outdated and unsuited to the spirit of modern times.

“A timely lecture is given by Robert Cardinal Sarach. He shows silence in its external and internal aspects. External silence, is the absence of sounds (cars, airplanes, cell phones). External silence, is also the ‘absence of words.’ However, this is a difficult activity in post-modern society. It can be seen as a weakness. Nowadays, ‘no words,’ is an ascetic exercise. It is an asceticism in the use of the gift of words” (Stefaniak 2018, 69).

Christ offers silence and with silence a rest from the noise that surrounds 21st century man. The task of post-pandemic ministry is undoubtedly to rediscover the treasure of silence and apprehension. The Church today has absorbed much from outside, perhaps too much even. There is a need to silence the many anxieties, news, or confusion. The remedy brings only silence, which is still best understood by some contemplative orders, among them the Carthusians. These communities manage to guard the treasure of silence, thanks to which they are in a sense liberated from worldly influence. Pope Benedict XVI has also said much on the subject. In the papal message for the XLVI World Mass Media Day (2012), we come across important insights:

“In silence we hear and come to know ourselves better, thought is born and deepens... In silence joy, worry, suffering are expressed, and it is in silence that they find a particularly intense form of expression. Thus, from silence is born a more complex communication, requiring sensitivity and the ability to listen, which is an indicator of depth... For this reason, it is necessary to create an appropriate environment, a kind of ‘ecosystem’ in which there would be a balance between silence, words, images and sounds... modern man is often bombarded with answers to questions he has never asked himself, or with needs he does not feel. Silence is valuable because it fosters the necessary distinction between the many stimuli and the many answers we receive, precisely in order to isolate the questions that are truly important and focus on them... in various religious traditions, solitude and silence are privileged spaces that help people find themselves and that Truth that gives meaning to all things... In silent contemplation, the eternal Word, through which the whole world was created, becomes present with greater power, and we become aware of that plan of salvation that God is carrying out through words and gestures throughout human history... the Word and silence. To learn to communicate means to acquire the ability to listen, to contemplate, and not just to speak” (Benedict XVI 2012).

The Church's polemics with the world, and especially its succumbing to the world's noise, has never done the Church any good. St. Peter's boat proved to be strongest when it stood firm on the Gospel and Tradition, resisting the striking

waves of atheism or secularization. From the dawn of the Church's history, the Eucharistic cult was surrounded by special devotion, and its heyday was in the Middle Ages and continues to this day. Many hymns and songs have been preserved from this period, as well as the custom of adoring Christ in the Blessed Sacrament (including *Adoro te devote*, *Tantum Ergo Sacramentum*, *O Sacrum Convivium*, *O Salutaris Hostia*, *Panis Angelicus*, *Ave Verum Corpus* and others). Scholasticism left many theological volumes on the subject (e.g. St. Thomas Aquinas – *Summa Theologiae*), which shows what value the Eucharist has always had and has always had for the Church, and this was also emphasized by later positions of popes, theologians or councils (e.g. Council of Trent, Vatican II). It has also sometimes been the subject of fierce disputes and scientific inquiry. The Eucharist is the living presence of God, who has not and will never leave us orphans. We came out of the pandemic unscathed with the experience of many insights and thoughts. May it bear good fruit. Certainly, the Church must face the challenge of raising the quality of pastoral care and making its forms more flexible. The goal of the formation of the modern faithful should be to balance the spiritual and rational elements in the perception of life and the world. Formation of consciences, but also more specialized retraining of the laity in the current issues of the scientific world and embedding modern knowledge in the perspective of Catholic doctrine is one of the renewed ways of pastoral care. Above all, pastoralists have the task of helping secularized man rediscover the sacred, the beautiful and the value of silence.

CONCLUSION

To sum up our brief study of the post-pandemic reality, the Church is nevertheless drawn in colors of hope. The experience of the 2020-2022 period has strengthened church circles, reaffirming the faith of those who, prior to the pandemic, did not treat the Church solely in terms of Sunday custom. At the same time, it exposed the weaker points of pastoral care, which, if learned well, can help new forms flourish. Confronting the real power of the media world reveals that the faithful must receive from the Church a more sophisticated intellectual formation, through which the modern churchman will be able to analyze and filter media messages, separating facts from interpretations of facts and manipulation. Shifting the formative emphasis from young children to Christian parents may result, in the nearer future, in raising a generation of very mature and theologically aware young people, who will acquire the tools to build the Church of the future not only in the church, but also at home. Strengthening this pastoral model with a series of meetings with people of science, medicine, bioethics, psychology – can result in the formation of a strong environment of lay people in the Church, whose voice will not be able to be ignored in non-church and secular spaces. A light for the future is what is most precious and imperishable in the Church – that is, the Sacraments – with the Eucharist at the top. Worship of the Blessed Sacrament and an attractive

vision of Christianity – as a rational religion, open to constructive dialogue, willing to draw on the latest advances in science and technology is a wonderful alternative for a world lost in the noise of the media. As the Church, we still have much to offer the world and man. The responsibility to safeguard the great deposit of faith rests perhaps even more firmly on the shoulders of us, the scientific community in the Church, which has a broad understanding of the complexity of the challenges facing the Church. May the experience of the pandemic release many lessons and ideas for a future into which we enter always with Christ – the same yesterday, today and forever.

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