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TRANSFORM REGULAR PASTORAL CARE INTO
MISSIONARY WORK

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Abstract

In this article, the author offers a critical reflection on pastoral care within the parish community. In the first chapter, the author analyses the ambivalence of modern culture through a theological and pastoral perspective and its consequences for the Church's pastoral dimension. The second chapter emphasises recognising the signs of the times and the importance of building a personal relationship with God as well as cooperating with others in the common mission of building the Kingdom of God. The conclusion presents some proposals and guidelines for transforming the Church in the synodal spirit. In the process of continually bringing the Christian message up to date (aggiornamento), the author highlights the importance of authenticity, fidelity to Christian truth, closeness, existential conversion and ongoing rivalry with modern man in his joys and sorrows, successes and mistakes.

Keywords: *parish pastoral care, transformation, synodality, cooperation*

INTRODUCTION

Often in the local Church, especially at meetings involving priests, both in the Franciscan Province of the Most Holy Redeemer and in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Split-Makarska, priests often lament about the exceeding high age of most priests (60 years and older). Many health problems of brother priests are also mentioned. Without neglecting our reality, given that the implementation of our pastoral plans depends on real-

ity regardless of how perfectly they are devised, it is nevertheless tiring to constantly bring up these familiar lamentations. Therefore, this article focuses on what we, the Church, the community of the baptised, can and should do in the mission to which God has called us and which we carry out with others in the Church. I dare point out right away that our mentality, way of life and actions are more troublesome than the age of or the insufficient number of priests. Why do I think that? Because problems do not only exist in the pastoral activity of older priests. We also have younger priests who are not sufficiently active or open enough to cooperate with the lay faithful. Certainly, some priests may feel called out and reproach such academic criticism as they often do toward other academics and, finally, toward Pope Francis himself, to whom complaints are directed that he criticises priests too often. Moreover, one can often hear priests say that they try to carefully choose their words when speaking about other believers, that the priests sacrifice a lot despite their age, illnesses, and living conditions, yet they are often criticised by many. Words are also carefully chosen when referring to believers, catechists, movements, associations and communities in the parish. Often, these people and groups are elevated and unduly praised, but when something is not going well in the parish, say, in pastoral care –the parish priest is always the main culprit, as many priests testify. Aware of these situations, I do not want people to feel they are called out in any constructive critique – especially those who do not deserve it. In other words, I do not think parish priests are the main culprits for the situation in the Church. However, along with everyone else's involvement, they can do a lot to change this unenviable *pastoral lethargy*. How can this be achieved? This article intends to answer how to transform pastoral work that is ordinary and mostly static into dynamic missionary activity. The answer will not be exhaustive due to insufficient knowledge, experience and available opportunity, but a small step to improving the current situation. First, a few words will be given about the current situation because a proper remedy requires a precise diagnosis.

1. THE AGE OF SIGNIFICANT CHANGES

Our mission in the Church and society does not take place in timelessness or an abstract place but in real time and space,

carefully devised for our existential circumstances.¹ Therefore, we will first briefly identify our current circumstances and, while also relying on the guidelines of the Church, offer some answers on how to live faith more authentically and improve the current situation in pastoral care. In the past, identities were well grounded; the world was simple, and life followed an established routine that was predictable. There was no need to interpret anything – neither marriage, the priesthood, obligations at school, work, or different roles in society. Everything was accepted under an established inertia – it was all self-evident. We can also call this time, using the words of the famous Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, the time of the social catechumenate, the age in which society underwent formation on its own (*civitas christiana*) due to uniform values prevailing in all parts of society². This has not been the case for a long time. A lot has changed and is changing before our very eyes every day.

In postmodernism, a famous Canadian philosopher Taylor points out that religion has not disappeared but has simply changed, becoming a “product” left to each individual to decide whether to choose.³ In this epochal change, referred to by many today, it seems that man no longer accepts his identity as he once did, even biologically, but increasingly, influenced by popular culture, wants to create the identity himself, sometimes falling into the enticing danger of experimenting and adventurism. Once an identity loses its social anchors that had made it seem natural and predetermined, the struggle for identification and the demand for a new identity becomes increasingly important, because the feeling of insecurity is unbearable. Subsequently, various substitutes are created, surrogates, especially in young people, virtual identities and virtual communities that can be fun but only apparently resemble closeness. They cannot replace a real community or build a personal identity.⁴ In short, the growing rift between faith and life, faith and culture, is the tragedy

¹ Cf. Norbert Mette, *Il Gesù difficile. L'invito a una prassi di sequela nelle condizioni attuali*, Concilium 33 (1997), 1, 41.

² Cf. Charles Taylor, *L'età secolare*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2010., 12.

³ *Ibidem*, 13.

⁴ Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Identitet, Razgovori s Bedenettom Vecchiejm*, Pelago, Zagreb, 2009, 26-27.

of our time⁵. The world around us is increasingly divided into poorly matched fragments, and our lives are often fragmented into poorly connected episodes.⁶ Many believers feel divided and torn within themselves upon exposure to different ideas, values and ideologies. They no longer know how to be the Church today, how to be the educators of their children in such a cacophony of voices, opinions, and values incompatible with each other.

All certainty, the predictability that had previously marked life, has disappeared. We could say that in communist times, we had social security, but the price was too high. We paid for it with uncertainties and glaring deprivation of political, economic, and religious freedom. Upon achieving freedom, at a great sacrifice, we have achieved, along with all the objections and shortcomings, the freedom for which we craved, and which defines us as a people, but we have lost social security. This form of business insecurity, uncertainty, job loss and early retirement has literally destroyed many people. Many were forced to abandon the lives they had, leave their families, friends, and familiar surroundings and head off to a faraway country to survive. Now is not the time to address more deeply all the problems this escape entailed. It is enough to point out that many relationships fell apart because of the war, injustices in society (privatisation, clientelism, corruption), and the adoption of new liberal lifestyles.⁷ The latter, even now and in the future, will be even more evident, representing the greatest obstacle to our evangelising mission.

The link between mortal life and eternity, bridges built over the centuries, indeed, over the millennia, are increasingly being discarded. It is as if people no longer have any need for what is beyond – God. That is why many in recent decades have spoken

⁵ Cf. Pavao VI., *Adhortatio apostolica Evangelii nuntiandi de evangelizatione in mundo huius temporis*, 8 decembris 1975, AAS 68 (1976), n. 20; “The split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times. Therefore, every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelization of culture, or more correctly of cultures. They have to be regenerated by an encounter with the Gospel. But this encounter will not take place if the Gospel is not proclaimed”.

⁶ Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Identitet, Razgovori s Bedenettom Vecchiejm*, 17.

⁷ For more on the topic, see Tonči Matulić, *Tužaljke kamenja hrvatske pustinje, Pomirenje i duhovna obnova u svjetlu proročke i kritičke raščlambe stanja duha i svijesti suvremenoga hrvatskoga društva*, Glas Koncila, Zagreb, 2011, 91-99, 174-199, 264-275.

of forgetting about God and the killing of God in the West.⁸ We are witnessing the almost daily deconstruction of Christian values, predominantly Christian anthropology, such as marriage and the family, leading to a demographic cataclysm in the most developed and affluent part of the world.

1.1. *Recognising the signs of the times and being close to people*

How does one today, in this modernity, as the famous Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls it, which shows itself most in rapid change, erratic identities, the dictates of entertainment and universal consumerism – proclaim the Gospel? How, then, today, in principle, and in all honesty, do we talk about God to a tired, indifferent and increasingly lonely individual from a dysfunctional family, which is increasing in number? How do we attract and inspire in them the Gospel message, show them that God is alive and present in our lives? I do not have a simple prescription for the problem, but only my thoughts and guidelines as a starting point to delve further into this discussion.

First, I would like to draw attention to a common wrong approach, although contrary to the conciliar vision of the Church, which can still be heard in our country and is most evident in the attitude of rejecting society, especially Western society, and which is accompanied by an often false notion of our superiority, regardless of whether it is individual or national.⁹ Specifically, the blame for the rapid decrease in religious practice and the crisis of

⁸ Cf. Richard Koch & Chris Smith, *Samoubojstvo Zapada*, Naklada Ljevak, Zagreb, 2007; Frano Prcela, *Bogozaborav, Razmišljanja o aktualnim izazovima Crkve*, Synopsis, Zagreb – Sarajevo 2014; Zoran Vukman, *Bogoubojstvo Zapada*, author-publisher, Trogir, 2016; Douglas Murray, *Čudna smrt Europe, Imigracija-Identitet-Islam*, Puls, Zagreb, 2018; Fabrice Hadjadj, *Kad se sve tako ima raspasti, Razmišljanja o svršetku kulture i moderniteta*, KS, Zagreb, 2019.

⁹ The Church's view of the world and history is largely determined by the manner of her pastoral action. If the Church, and with it the parish, place themselves above the world, subjecting it to "serving" them, while accumulating privileges, power and wealth, or if they were to live outside the social fabric, locked up in the sacristy and observe or fight with animosity to "conquer" what surrounds them, such an understanding of the world is definitely negative and will have negative consequences for pastoral care. If the Church – and also the parish – see themselves in the silhouette of the ecclesiology of Vatican II, they will quickly discover that they belong within the world, as those who upbuild communion and serve people. Cf. Antonio Fallico, *Le cinque piaghe della parrocchia italiana, Tra diagnosi e terapia*, Cittadella, Assisi, 2003, 145.

faith is often attributed to the modern world, especially the West. However, it is not the modern world's fault it fails to recognise our Christian message and its value. Perhaps we no longer know how to live and transmit our faith in a modern way. Perhaps we are responsible for not knowing how to properly communicate Christian doctrine to children, young people, and people in general, especially the increasing number seeking the holy so that they may understand it. Perhaps we should give up the so-called civil religion model, as Metz calls it, which, like all other social service activities, cares about satisfying religious needs and looks to the messianic religion to follow Christ.¹⁰ Perhaps we should be transforming the parish, increasingly seen as a religious service¹¹ and a service agency for the sacred (sacraments, sacramentals, devotions) as Greshake points out, into a missionary community in which faith is lived, communion is built, and dialogue, synodality and solidarity practised; a community that brings people closer to God and each other.¹²

Perhaps we should view questions about God more seriously. Deal more seriously with the questions from various seekers of God concerning the meaning of life because, as Pope Benedict XVI once said during his visit to Germany: "Agnostics, who do not find peace before the question of God; these persons who suffer for their sins and desire a pure heart are closer to God's Kingdom than the "routine" faithful, who see only a system in the Church, but their hearts are not touched by faith."¹³ We certainly need to recognise the "adolescence" of people, the weak thoughts of the time in which we live, resulting in many seeking an escape in various forms of distractions, oases, and rest from unbearable reality.

In this time of the dictates of entertainment, it seems God is not interesting or relevant to many people's lives. Accordingly,

¹⁰ Cf. Johan Baptist Metz, *Politička teologija: 1967-1997*, KS, Zagreb, 2004, 174; Cf. Željko Tanjić, *Teologija pred izazovima sadašnjeg trenutka*, KS, Zagreb, 2009, 141-153.

¹¹ Cf. Gisbert Greshake, *Biti svećenik u ovom vremenu. Teologija – pastoralna praksa – duhovnost*, Zagreb, 2010, 223-225.

¹² Cf. Antonio Mastantuono, *La parrocchia per una fraternità possibile*, *Orientamenti pastorali* LXVIII (2020), 11, 51.

¹³ Benedict XVI, *Pred Bogom nisu važne riječi nego djela*, Accessed: 20 August 2023, http://www.archivioradiovaticana.va/storico/2011/09/25/pred_bogom_nisu_va%C5%BENE_rije%C4%8Di_nego_djela_istaknuo_je_papa_na_misi_u/cro-523619.

Stjepan Kušar, a well-known theologian, points out that in “the power of media and social communications, the best epithet we could give God is: a boring God. Everything can become the subject of media sensationalism, even in religious life; the life of the Church, in terms of history and the occult. However, when it comes to God Himself, the intensity of the experience is much less; man walks out of the church as though nothing important has happened. It is as though God does not seem interesting, like we, his earthly staff, do not seem to have very appealing ideas and processes of keeping people awake to the notion of God.”¹⁴ By recognising these signs of the times, our duty is to keep people awake to the notion of God. Discovering, witnessing and proclaiming a God in whom people are becoming less and less interested. We will perform this task more successfully if we start from life, from existential matters and problems that our interlocutor encounters in our talk about God.

How is this to be achieved? Certainly, instead of accusing and rejecting the world and society because it has rejected God, we have to be the so-called neighbour, a companion to society, to man and patiently lead them to God. It is not only about better communication or the ability to present an argument but more about the inability to live the Gospel today. It is precisely the testimony of our lives that attracts others, incomparably more so than words themselves, even when perfectly and academically formulated. Yes, this is the task of all of us, not to stick to a well-established way, usually based on catechesis from First Communion and Confirmation, appropriate piety and Holy Mass, but always trying to find new paths, encounters, activities, and drawing, of course, from the rich sources of Revelation and Tradition, but also learning from the experience of other people.

2. LIVING A MYSTICAL LIFE EVERYDAY

The first thing we want to emphasise in our talk about the pastoral transformation of our communities, especially the parishes, is to acknowledge that God always has the initiative. He invites us on this adventure with him. He also inspires us to open

¹⁴ Taken from: Ivan Jurin, *Držati ljude budnima za Boga*, Accessed: 17 August 2023, <http://fratellanza.net/drzati-ljude-budnimazaboga/?fbclid=IwAR12g0qzVlQLeJJ2vTKjzb8z51iRuRq00r0GWvVARE9nkVoQ5NKQJgr5Z9g>.

up to him and receive the right answers, getting the necessary strength, ideas, and creativity for our actions. This, after all, is what Jesus promised us, telling the Apostles that he would not abandon them, but through the Holy Spirit, he would lead them (cf. John 16:13). The first and fundamental step is our relationship with God. On this relationship, all other relationships are built. It is built primarily through prayer, silence, celebrating the Sacraments, and meditation on the Word of God.

The second important thing to point out is that the Church's mission is not primarily to fulfil human needs (nor does it neglect them!) but stems from the inner need of God. God, who is essentially the communion of love, wants to give himself and communicate himself to us. Accordingly, the mission of the Church far exceeds performing a task or obeying a command. Hence, the mission is not only our action, our doing, because it is, above all, a gift which should be accepted and allowed to permeate us deeply. As a French theologian pointed out: "Before becoming our work, the mission is God's work. Before it becomes a project, it is witnessing. Before being a duty to be performed, it is love that should be accepted."¹⁵

Perhaps we should clarify our image of God if distorted. Specifically, given that the coronavirus pandemic has painfully exposed many of our weaknesses and spiritual poverty, it has also shown that some believers (and priests) have a wrong image of God;¹⁶ a God who is not only distant and unemphatic to human suffering but also who punishes one group of people for the sins of others.¹⁷ However, it is an opportunity to liberate oneself from this image of God and become aware that our God is not only an object but also the subject of love. It is not just any love but a radical love for which he offered himself to people, setting an example for them to do the same. Accordingly, we must realise that God, who is love (1 Jn4:16), does not help people because he is all-powerful but primarily because he is compassionate and

¹⁵ Jean Rigal, *Découvrir l'Église*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 2000, 192.

¹⁶ Regarding the effect of the pandemic on faith and what the Church can and should do in the coronavirus pandemic circumstances, see: Ivica Jurić, *A theological approach to mitigating the impacts of the SARS CoV-2 pandemic*, *St open* 2 (2021), 1-26.

¹⁷ Cf. David Neuhus, *Il virus è una punizione di Dio?* *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 2 (2020) 238; Cf. Francesco Cosentino, „Da questa crisi possiamo uscire migliori o peggiori“, *Quale Chiesa dopo la pandemia?* *Orientamenti pastorali*, LXIX (2021) 12, 16-17.

merciful; he is the Father. Concerning people, his gaze is not primarily focused on the sin of another man, but on the suffering of others and how to alleviate it.¹⁸ The lessons from the parables of the prodigal son and merciful Father (Luke 15:11-32), the Samaritans (John 4:1-42), or the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) undoubtedly show this perspective. Therefore, accepting the image of God from the Gospels means adopting his teaching on love, i.e., placing all the sufferers with whom he identifies at the centre of our attention and real form of serving (Mt 25:40).

Thus the way of being found in God, welcomed and encouraged by his spirit, means we can openly encounter others and share with them the joy of life and God's closeness. This approach is also how we will again make God relevant, present and authoritative in our personal and community life. Why is this important? It is important because our postmodern mind is not an atheistic mind that denies God but an agnostic mind that has made God irrelevant and superfluous to our lives. This mind identifies itself, for instance, in explaining away everything in a non-theological way, without appealing to a purpose or a final goal, but subjects everything to pragmatism and the immediate satisfaction of needs without senseless sacrifice.¹⁹ This task of witnessing the Good News can be simply called the mysticism of everyday life, a way of life in which we constantly feel close to God, protected, despite all circumstances. This kind of relationship necessarily presumes gratitude to God because he is our greatest wealth and joy.

2.1. *Opening up to Christ and building the Kingdom of God*

The foundation of our Christian communion is not only our relationships with each other, however important they may be. Our communities are not formed on the basis of blood kinship, marriage or personal affection, but the foundation of our communion is Christ, who has called us to follow him in his mission in different ways. "You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit" (John 15:16). Accordingly, it is clear that we within different ecclesial communities did not choose each other, but

¹⁸ Cf. Johan, B. Metz, *Prijedlog univerzalnog programa kršćanstva u doba globalizacije*, Teološke perspektive za XXI. stoljeće, R. Gibellini (ed.), Kršćanska sadašnjost, Zagreb, 2006, 400.

¹⁹ Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Identitet*, 61-63.

Christ connected us with himself through his call, and through him, he connected us with each other. Therefore, we achieve our communion through Christ. This communion does not abolish our personalities and differences, but they coexist harmoniously in such a way that we do not see every brother and sister despite their shortcomings as a nuisance that we would prefer to get rid of, but a gift that enriches us. Only in this way, in the spirit of an ecclesiology of communion, does our life become attractive to others.

Therefore, our greatest duty today is to teach, especially young people, to love people and life as it is, just like Saint Francis did because people and life are a great gift from God. Moreover, they are to love work, their profession through which they are fulfilled as people because, just like Francis understood it – work is a grace. It is necessary to teach young people to have love for others and care for all creation because life is not only in the never-ending feverish search for new adventures and fun (in an unconscious state due to opiates!), but in existence, building the Kingdom of God primarily by building harmonious relationships with all people. While society was, so to say, metaphysically “fuller,” perhaps there was no need for this kind of mysticism. However, in man’s aspiration to explain, lay bare and desacralize everything, and consequently make God superfluous, we need a new Saint Francis, a new mystic who will celebrate God in everyday life, bring peace and restore meaning to life. If man does not know how to enjoy existence, rejoice in life, and love people despite their imperfections, then he will enjoy everything else increasingly less. Chesterton, also called an apostle of common sense, wisely and humorously teaches this aspect in his writings.²⁰

3. THE FUTURE OF THE PARISH COMMUNITY DEPENDS ON ITS ABILITY TO TRANSFORM ITSELF

In addition to our personal relationship with God, from which our love for all people and all creation stems, it is important to build the community entrusted to us. This aspect applies to the parish community and all other forms of communities within the Church. Parish community is the fundamental institution through which the Church appears in a particular place.

²⁰ We especially recommend his two books: *The Everlasting Man* and *Orthodoxy*.

It is primarily a community of believers in some territory led by a parish priest, a place where the Word of God is heard, where the community grows in faith, a place of dialogue, proclamation, celebration and generous charity, as pointed out in the document of the Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church*, which provides guidelines and incentives for the conversion of the parish community in the missionary spirit.²¹ The parish has been in crisis for a long time and is failing to adequately respond to the spiritual needs of the people of our time. It is not only because of fewer priests or a smaller number of the faithful in rural parishes, although this also affects the mission of the Church.

Due to major sociocultural changes, the parish community is no longer able to be what it has been for centuries. Instead of a place where faith is learnt, a fundamental stronghold forming life values and giving routine to daily life, it is increasingly servicing situations, becoming a religious services agency devoid of its former relevance. The increasing mobility, a borderless culture of life appearing in many places, and especially the "digital culture", (modern communications and the Internet) have altered the understanding of space, language and human behaviour, especially young people, and created a crisis in the parish which had relied on a territorial principle.²² The relationship between the person and religion has changed in society, as well as the relationship between the person and institutions, and finally, the relationship between the person and territory.²³

The religious dimension is becoming less relevant to modern man.²⁴ The parish is no longer an existential support. Increasing mobility and the digital culture have changed attitudes towards the concept of territory and have made the whole world a global village. Moreover, the public perception of the Church and the

²¹ Cf. Congregation for the Clergy, *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church*, 27, 2020. Accessed on 10 August 2023, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/07/20/200720a.html>.

²² *Ibidem*, 8.

²³ More on details concerning these changes, see Sergio Lanza, *La parrocchia in un mondo che cambia*, OCD, Roma, 2004, 19-49.

²⁴ Cf. Paolo Asolan, *Perché Dio entri nel mondo, Lineamenti per una ri-comprensione teorica-pratica del ministero pastorale*, Lateran University Press, Città del Vaticano, 2011, 119-120.

parish should also be considered. When it comes to a parish derived from an institution so close, popular, spiritual and open to helping people in need, it is perceived by many people as part of a large and powerful organisation, often preoccupied with its interests.²⁵ In particular, we must bear this in mind in light of recently discovered sexual abuses in the Church in some countries that are not only the sin of individual persons but also the structural failure of the whole Church.

Nevertheless, looking at the present circumstances with the eyes of faith, we realise that the present changes are not only unfavourable circumstances but also an opportunity for change to improve existing practices. This conviction is not the fruit of incurable optimism but religiously reading the present situation in the Church that the Holy Spirit leads. Therefore, we should not declare that the crisis, i.e., the gradual death of the existing model of pastoral work, is the death of the Church. Every conversion and transformation is slow, painful, and a prerequisite for new growth. Therefore, the dying of old forms of pastoral work should be seen in terms of the Gospel logic of the seed as the beginning of the parish community's new life, the beginning of new forms that will bear new fruit.²⁶

3.1. *The parish community as an existential space*

In the transformation of pastoral activity, the parish should be seen more as a living space, in existential terms and not just territorially.²⁷ Therefore, new pastoral activities should be devised at the level above the parish, such as pastoral work among young people –if there are only a few young people in the parish or the parish priest is very old, charitable activities, and joint prepa-

²⁵ Regarding changes to perceptions of the Church and what she can and should do in the new circumstances, see Luca Bressan, *Le motivazioni teologico-pastorali che presidono alla scelte di accorpamento e allo scopo della parrocchia*, *Orientamenti pastorali*, LXVIII (2020) 11, 32-40; Paolo Carrara, *Va' e ripara la mia parrocchia*, *Il Regno* attualità e documenti, LXVII (2022) 4, 117-129.

²⁶ Cf. Armando Savignano, *Quale cristianesimo dopo la cristianità?* Accessed 7 May 2022. <https://www.avvenire.it/agora/pagine/quale-cristianesimo-dopo-la-cristianita>.

²⁷ The respective document from the Congregation for the Clergy, no. 16 says: "It is true that a characteristic of the Parish is that its rootedness at the centre of where people live from day to day. However, the Parish territory is no longer a geographical space only, but also the context in which people express their lives in terms of relationships, reciprocal service and ancient traditions."

ration for Confirmation involving two parishes. In other words, as John Paul II said: “The parish should seek itself outside of itself.”²⁸ Territory is important, not only as a physical space but as a living and anthropological space, as a “space of relationships”.

Consequently, that means the parish community should leave the “temple” and go where people are, where they live, work, and rest (not only be present in the physical sense but also online through their own websites, shows, videos, blogs, and social networks), be present in the lives of children, young people, adults – be the salt, leaven and light in the territory where the parish is located. Building the community in such a way means the parish will not be drawn into an inner intimacy but will go to human (anthropological) areas where there is everyday life.²⁹ Importantly, communion is not only exhausted within the parish community but is achieved with neighbouring parish communities, bearing in mind the specific territory and its needs.

In this sense, the structures that exist outside the parish community should be taken into account. First, we refer to schools, nursing homes, hospitals, prisons – all social places not directly tied to the parish community. Pastoral activities should include all pastoral entities in the area: shrines (if any), monasteries, religious men and women (monks and nuns), catechists, movements and communities, and the faithful who recognise their charisms and are included in a common mission. The parish community should be more flexible to become a community of smaller communities, groups, and movements, a dynamic community that develops new forms of work without just closing itself to “what has been done on a regular basis.”

According to the missionary key, the central importance in transforming the Church is to make room for everyone in the parish community. Given that we live in a time of individualism, marginalisation and solitude among so many people, especially in large urban areas, the parish community is called to be a living sign of Christ’s closeness. It is best achieved through a network of fraternal relationships and various activities directed to people affected by new forms of social exclusivity and pov-

²⁸ Giovanni Paolo II, *Coinvolgere nel sinodo tutto il popolo di Dio nelle parrocchie e al di là delle parrocchie, L'incontro del vescovo di Roma con il clero della sua diocesi*, Insegnamenti XI (1988), 1, LEV, Città del Vaticano, 1989, 476.

²⁹ Sergio Lanza, *Convertire Giona*, OCD, Roma, 2008, 314.

erty. Importantly, a “culture of encounter” in the parish should be created, becoming a place of building communion, dialogue, solidarity and acceptance. It should be a space where everyone with questions, needs, ministries and charisms find their place and role. Therefore, it is a space of dialogue, cooperation, listening and appreciation for each individual, and a space of spiritual growth and the practice of co-responsibility.³⁰

In this way, we create practical believers from formal ones and recognisable and valued members from anonymous ones. Essentially, the synodal path implies the creation of a network of relationships in which the gifts and abilities of all believers are recognised, where responsibility is shared, faith is interiorised, becoming a personal choice and serving others. This outcome happens by entering into a personal relationship with God, to whom all our activities are directed. For this to happen, pastoral care must not be reduced to merely repeating ordinary actions. Instead, it must be dynamic, innovative, and open to the great potential of the lay faithful for the Church’s mission.³¹

Unfortunately, it must be acknowledged that many lay faithful, despite their competencies and gifts, are still waiting in many parishes for affirmation and involvement in the parish community’s mission. Their neglect harms the Church because it remains deprived of the many graces, talents, and competencies that God abundantly distributes to all believers of Christ for the good of the Church and society.

3.2. *The parish as a missionary community*

In addition to building communion within the parish community, it is decisively important in this transformation to become a missionary community – a Church that goes out to encounter people in their existential needs. This communion (*communio*) and mission (*missio*) entail the life of the Church and the parish

³⁰ Cf. “The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church”, 25, 32.

³¹ The mentioned document of the Congregation for the Clergy, no. 17 “Moreover, mere repetitive action that fails to have an impact upon people’s concrete lives remains a sterile attempt at survival, which is usually welcomed by general indifference. If the Parish does not exude that spiritual dynamic of evangelisation, it runs the risk of becoming self-referential and fossilised, offering experiences that are devoid of evangelical flavour and missionary drive, of interest only to small groups.”

community. The Church that is a sacrament or sign and instrument of the closest possible union with God and the unity of the whole human race³² does not exist for her own sake but for the mission she received from the Father through the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is, therefore, based on the mission and missionary-ies³³ at the service of the world and directed towards the building up of the Kingdom of God, of which it is already the seed and beginning on this earth.³⁴

Martin Heidegger taught how the technique mastered spatial remoteness, shortened travel time and made the world smaller without creating closeness. Yes, we can overcome distance with technical inventions, but not create closeness because creating closeness is a spiritual task. Closeness has to be created, as our Teacher taught us in the Gospel from the story of the Good Samaritan, so that one may awaken closer to the other person. In a time when people are increasingly fleeing from real face-to-face relationships into the dimension of virtual relationships, the parish is called to develop the “art of closeness”, a place where one feels safe and accepted, where one lives and promotes dialogue and openness to all.³⁵ Pope Francis also referred to the need for a living community with a synodal character in his first program document: “If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life.”³⁶

It is impossible at this moment to specifically identify what each community exactly needs. After all, it is the task of each community, especially the parish priest, the parish vicar and the

³² Cf. Vatican II Council, *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, para. 1. Accessed 12 August 2023, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

³³ Cf. Vatican II Council. *Ad Gentes*, Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church, 2, 5. Accessed 12 August 2023, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html.

³⁴ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 5

³⁵ Cf. “The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church”, 26.

³⁶ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*. “The Joy of the Gospel”, 49. Accessed 13 August 2023, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

pastoral council, to reflect on this matter, systematically devise pastoral activity and implement it together with everyone else. In carrying out our mission, it is certainly important to avoid the extremes of blind activism (just doing something) and sterile bureaucracy and traditionalism (it has always been done that way; everything is by the rules), instead constantly listen to the Holy Spirit, read the signs of the times, recognise *kairos*: the existential needs of believers and other people and strive to respond evangelically to them. Listening to what believers want is important because the Holy Spirit speaks through them. From them, too, various initiatives can improve or regenerate the activities of the parish community.

In this sense, perhaps precisely at the request of the faithful, the parish priest will initiate a youth group, establish a choir (youth band), initiate adult catechesis, establish a bible group, charity or charismatic group, sports activities with Catholic scouts and the like. Of course, not everyone needs to get involved in everything, but some of the mentioned groups or others (Franciscan Youth, Third Order of Saint Francis, Neocatechumenal Way, prayer group) bring novelty, engage believers who have been distanced, contribute to growth in the faith, and enrich the Church and society. Of course, movements and communities do not replace the parish but are integrated into it and revive it through their activities.

3.3. *The role of church movements and communities in parish pastoral work*

Because of the above situations in a society marked by individualism,³⁷ loneliness and indifference, we see a large, opportune space that can be successfully filled in pastorally by church movements and new communities through their activities. Through the richness of their activities and initiatives, they can integrate many distant believers into the Church, especially in large communities, and thus help the Church to move from a model of “preservation” to a missionary model. Of course, we

³⁷ Pope Francis has cautioned that excessive individualism “which weakens family bonds and ends up considering each member of the family as an isolated unit, leading in some cases to the idea that one’s personality is shaped by his or her desires, which are considered absolute.” Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 33.

always see their place and role as an integral and not a parallel part of regular pastoral activity in parish communities.³⁸

In movements and communities, which does not exclude parish communities, great importance is given to the person's spirituality and the development of their vocation, recognising and valuing the various gifts (charisms) given for the growth of the community and society. The Church is present through its movements and communities in many areas of human life. It has been made possible thanks to their flexibility. Furthermore, in a time of increasing individualism, confinement within the virtual world, and even narcissism, people, especially young people, are very important because they create social capital, integrate into society, and form an identity during accelerated social fragmentation. Acknowledging how much families and family evangelisation are in crisis, especially in Western Europe, there is no doubt that they also represent a very important role in Christian education, especially in large cities.

Our faith is not only informative but also performative: it offers a message that shapes life in a new way, as Pope Benedict says in his encyclical *Spe Salvi*.³⁹ Based on the living Word, read and contemplated in the community of believers, the movements and new communities form their thoughts and attitudes according to the only teacher: Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word. Not neglecting the rich Catholic tradition, instead relying on it, they transpose it into an everyday existential experience. In this mutual and fruitful dialectic between rich, ancient traditions and the new needs of the faithful, an educational process of faith takes place, providing spiritual accompaniment and proper formation.

To welcome movements and new communities in the parish means strengthening communion and enriching the mission. They help the parish become a "community of communities". This network of movements and communities within the parish strengthens the parish and prevents relationships from drowning

³⁸ More on the potential of church movements and communities in the mission of the Church, see Ivica Jurić, *Pokreti i nove zajednice u župi, Mogući protagonisti nove evangelizacije, Teološko-pastoralna prosudba, Crkva u svijetu*, Split, 2021; Ivica Jurić, *Pokreti i zajednice instrumenti formacije i evangelizacije*, *Vrhbosnensia* 21 (2018), 1, 153-171.

³⁹ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, "Saved in Hope" Encyclical of the Supreme Pontiff to the Bishops, Priests and Deacons, Men and Women Religious and all the Lay Faithful on Christian Hope, 2007, 10. Accessed 12 August 2023, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html.

in anonymity and the masses. Therefore, the apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici* asks bishops and priests to “promoting [...] small, basic or so-called “living” communities, where the faithful can communicate the Word of God and express it in service and love to one another.”⁴⁰ There is no doubt that we must not reduce the parish community to a kind of ‘container’ for movements and new, small communities. It is a home for all believers who approach it by participating in her life, who mostly do not belong to movements or new communities.

Finally, we can say that the future of the parish community depends on its ability to transform. Despite all the disputes and criticisms we hear every day, the parish community remains the fundamental place of evangelical proclamation and celebration of the Eucharist, a space of communion and solidarity, a place that illuminates society and gives it flavour due to the parish members giving testimony in their lives.⁴¹ To do this even better, more appropriately, whether a missionary community in the true sense, Jesus Christ has to be placed at the centre of its activities and encounter him.⁴² The Holy Spirit is the initiator of renewal, the main protagonist and the “creative marker” of transformation, ranked first in the transformation, i.e., the conversion of people (everyone in the parish and not only the parish priest!), and then consequentially the parish structure.⁴³ This implies abandoning the self-referential and clerical notion of pastoral work and developing integrated pastoral care in the synodal spirit.

⁴⁰ Giovanni Paolo II, *Esortazione apostolica post-sinodale Christifideles laici*, 30/12/1988, EV 11/1606-1900, 26.

⁴¹ Cf. “The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church”, 123.

⁴² “The parish is not a transitory structure, because it has great plasticity, and can take different forms that require adaptability and missionary creativity of pastors and the community. While it is certainly not the only evangelising institution, if capable of constantly reforming and adapting, it will continue to be ‘a Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters. This assumes that it has contact with families and people’s lives and that it does not become a verbose structure separated from people or groups of the elect who look only to themselves.” Pontificio consiglio per la promozione della nuova evangelizzazione, *Direttorio per la catechesi, Città del Vaticano*, 2020, 300.

⁴³ Concerning the conversion and transformation of the parish community, see no. 2 (2022) *Vjesnika đakovačko-osječke nadbiskupije*, author’s article: Davor Vuković, *Obraćenje, zajedništvo i poslanje. Putovi prema preobrazbi župne zajednice*, *Vjesnik đakovačko-osječke nadbiskupije, Časopis za pastoralnu orijentaciju*, 150 (2022) 2, 29-34.

CONCLUSION

Pastoral conversion of the parish community is not only the task of the parish priest, who carries great responsibility for the entrusted community, but it is also the task of all the faithful, especially helpers who participate more directly in planning and implementing pastoral activities in the parish. Each of these persons, based on the ministry, responsibilities and charisms, can and should contribute to the renewal of the parish community. Without an inner conversion, external changes in the Church and its structures will be of little use. Many people, tired of various problems, cry out for spiritual food and a testimony of a fulfilling life. Many seek hope, strength and spiritual thought that can take hold of their lives and give them deeper meaning. The Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, possesses this hope, word and meaning in the Word of God, Sacred Scripture, Sacraments, and the harmonious community life. The Church must not keep this “food” for herself, but, having become rich in God, must be a treasure for every person, especially those in need, at different existential peripheries of life. Living in circumstances increasingly affected by secularisation, individualism and the dictates of entertainment, the faith of the individual as well as witnessing to the faith by smaller communities, movements and groups, becomes crucial. Through them, the Church can find and finds each day a new, a more suitable and dynamic way of living its presence in society. This way does not mean escaping into pre-modern ways of living the faith, much less abandonment to cheap modernisation, i.e., adapting faith to the demands of the entertainment industry, which has become a criterion of relevance for many. Only through inculturation, i.e. incarnation of the spirit of the Gospel into the lived culture of our time, can the Church successfully carry out its mission.

PREOBRAZITI REDOVITI PASTORAL U MISIONARSKI RAD

Sažetak

Autor u članku kritički promišlja o stanju u pastoralu župne zajednice. U prvom poglavlju teološki-pastoralno analizira ambivalentnost moderne kulture i njezine konzekvence na pastoralno djelovanje Crkve. U drugom poglavlju ističući važnost prepoznavanja znakova vremena naglašava presudnost izgradnje osobnog odnosa s Bogom kao i suradnje s drugima u zajedničkom poslanju izgradnje Božjeg kraljevstva. U zaključnom dijelu rada donosi neke konkretne prijedloge, smjernice preobrazbe Crkve u sinodalnom duhu. U procesu trajnog posadašljenja (*aggiornamenta*) kršćanske poruke ističe osobito važnost autentičnosti, vjernosti kršćanskoj istini kao i presudnost blizine, egzistencijalnog obraćanja i trajnog suputništva sa suvremenim čovjekom u njegovim radostima i žalostima, uspjesima i pogreškama.

Ključne riječi: župni pastoral, preobrazba, sinodalnost, suradnja