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What Parish for the 21st Century? Parish Renewal Guidelines in the Context of Current Cultural Changes in Europe¹

Kakšna naj bo župnija v 21. stoletju? Smernice župnijske preнове v kontekstu trenutnih kulturnih sprememb v Evropi

Abstract: On the 29th of June 2020 the Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy released a new pastoral instruction on the parish: "The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelizing mission of the Church." The organizational structure of the Church, well-established over previous epochs, is currently undergoing a certain crisis – a consequence of a wider crisis of the Church and even a wider crisis of the Christian faith in the countries of Western civilization. It is not only the declining number of priests but also the decreasing number of Catholics that has led to a weakening of the parish status. Bishops in Germany, Switzerland and other countries in Western Europe have probably already accepted this phenomenon and are focusing on the development of pastoral care in supra-parish organizations, such as unions (communities) of several parishes or large regional pastoral centers. Unfortunately, these organisms resemble religious services and Church administration stations rather than former parish communities bustling with religious life.

The aim of this study is to determine the chances of survival for the parish under the current circumstances of the Church in Europe. If a parish is to survive the current cultural changes, it is necessary to answer the following questions: What should the parish be like? What are the sources of its renewal and strengthening? The methodological tool behind the theses developed here will be the analysis of the above-mentioned instruction released by the Congregation for the Clergy and statements made by the last three popes, especially Pope Francis. After a short introduction, the current cultural context of parish pastoral work in Europe will be outlined, and then three directions of parish renewal will be presented: the parish as a missionary community, the parish as a com-

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munity of communities, and the parish as a community of co-responsible service.

Keywords: parish, pastoral care, Church, community, missionary renewal

Povzetek: 29. 6. 2020 je vatikanska Kongregacija za kler izdala novo pastoralno navodilo za župnije z naslovom „Pastoralno spreobrnjenje župnijske skupnosti v službi evangelizacijskega poslanstva Cerkve“. Organizacijska struktura Cerkve, dobro izoblikovana v preteklih obdobjih, se trenutno spopada z določeno krizo, ki je posledica širše krize v Cerkvi – in še širše krize krščanske vere v državah zahodne civilizacije. Ne le zmanjševanje števila duhovnikov, temveč tudi zmanjševanje števila vernikov je privedlo k oslabitvi vloge župnij. Škofje v Nemčiji, Švici in drugih državah Zahodne Evrope so to dejstvo verjetno že sprejeli in se osredotočajo na razvoj pastoralne oskrbe v nadžupnijskih organizacijah – kot denimo v zvezah (skupnostih) več župnij ali v velikih pokrajinskih pastoralnih središčih. Takšni organizmi na žalost bolj spominjajo na verske storitve in postaje cerkvene uprave kakor pa na nekdanje župnijske skupnosti, kjer cveti versko življenje.

Cilj te študije je opredeliti možnosti preživetja župnij v trenutnih razmerah v Evropi. Če naj bi župnija trenutne kulturne spremembe preživela, je treba odgovoriti na naslednja vprašanja: Kakšna naj bo župnija? Kateri so viri njene prenovne in okrepiteve? Metodološko orodje v ozadju tez, ki jih razvijamo, je analiza prej omenjenega navodila, ki ga je izdala Kongregacija za kler, in izjave zadnjih treh papežev – zlasti papeža Frančiška. Za kratkim uvodom je orisan trenutni kulturni kontekst župnijskega pastoralnega dela v Evropi, nato pa so predstavljene tri smeri župnijske prenovne: župnija kot misijonska skupnost, župnija kot skupnost skupnosti in župnija kot skupnost soodgovornega služenja.

Ključne besede: župnija, pastoralna oskrba, Cerkev, skupnost, misijonarska prenova

1. Introduction

The parish is a social structure of the Church, the one closest to Catholics. Most Christians discover the Church through the parish (Rahner 1967). Owing to the parish, the Church becomes a visible sign of redemption and a tool for a community of believers to lead a holy life, united at the table of God's Word and at the altar of the Communion, penetrated by the power of the Holy Spirit, the first activator of faith and love in the Christian hearts. Although other forms of the Church community are possible, the ecclesial community finds its direct and clear role in parish life.

The parish is a multifaceted phenomenon with two basic dimensions that can be recognized: institutional and communal. The former makes the parish a visible, specific, historical reality, which belongs to the diocese, subject to social changes.

What is of major importance here are parish institutions and a community of the faithful both performing various functions and roles. The latter, internal and invisible in character, makes the parish a community of faith, religion, and love. The decisive role is performed here by God through the Holy Trinity, a source of grace and love. Unity of the faithful with Christ, achieved through the Holy Spirit, on the way to the Father's house, is a fundamental aim of the parish community.

On the 29th of June 2020, the Congregation for the Clergy announced a new pastoral instruction regarding the parish. It seems that this well-established organizational structure of the Church is undergoing a crisis in Europe. There are many causes lying at the foundations of the crisis. Predominantly, the crisis of the parish is a consequence of a crisis within the Church, and even from a broader perspective, of a crisis of the Christian faith observed in Western civilization. A decreasing number of priests and Catholic believers has led to the weakening of the parish in many European countries. However, is the process of parish degradation irreversible? Or can it be stopped and reversed? We would like to address the issue of the survival chances of the parish as a basic organizational structure of the Church and the chances for the development of parish pastoral care in Europe. This will be achieved on the basis of an analysis of the above-mentioned instruction published by the Congregation for the Clergy. We also heavily rely on the teachings of John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. This study will briefly outline the current cultural context of parish pastoral work in Europe in order to offer three synthetic conclusions.

2. The Current Cultural Context of Parish Pastoral Care in Europe

The cultural context of parish pastoral care in Europe at the beginning of the 21st century can be characterized by its multi-dimensional nature and great dynamics of changes (Świąt 2019, 75). Pluralism even manifests itself in the descriptions of society (modern, post-modern, post-capitalist, democratic, civil society, etc.). In the religious context, one may talk about a lay, secular, de-christianized, churchless, neopagan society (Mariański 2010, 19–20). The domain of culture produces more and more content characteristics of post-modern societies. These are: a) an increasing rebellion against an established order (in culture and the arts), leading to postmodern chaos and pluralism of cultures, worldviews and religions, b) a lack of accepted authorities, c) the rising importance of information and the media, leading to information noise, d) a crisis of the Enlightenment's rationalism, e) triumph of the idea of the common liberty and civic society, f) the renaissance of localism and new individualism, g) global and civilizational threats, e.g. terrorism, pollution, rebellions of the excluded ones in the richest countries (Śliż and Szczepański 2008, 9).

Contemporary Europe is dominated by a consumerism culture, prioritizing personal happiness, individualism, self-fulfilment, youth, agility, pleasure, comfort,

and entertainment. The realization of these values fulfils many of people's needs, although it impedes social relationships, hampers the pursuit of higher values, promotes egoistic attitudes, limits oneself to worldly goods, and weakens the feeling of being responsible for oneself and others. The consumerism culture is shaped mostly by the mass media, in particular by advertising campaigns (Święś 2019, 78). Contemporary culture has become a marketing culture. The way it functions is strictly connected with products for sale. Through a process of McDonaldization, culture has become ludic and easily accessible, simple in terms of its structure and cognitive reception. Andrzej Potocki, a sociologist of religion, observes that »we have gone away from the source – from the cultivation which requires some effort from us« (2016, 89).

Cultural changes in Western Europe take place in the context of ideological secularism, which manifests itself through a spread of atheistic beliefs and attitudes. As observed by the Spanish archbishop Fernando Sebastián, »yesterday atheism was present in the minds of a few philosophers. Today atheism is present in our houses, among cousins, grandchildren, neighbors. Atheism concerns all of us and living as if God did not exist became atheism by negligence.« (GilTamayo 2013, 61) The issues such as faith deconstruction in the lives of many baptized European citizens, the issue of egoism, moral relativity, the triviality of sexual experience and dehumanization of culture become challenges facing the Church (Huzarek, Fiałkowski and Drzycimski 2018, 133–154). Pope Benedict XVI drew attention to the dramatic character of the current situation, expressed not only through indifference to the Christian faith but also its relegation to the margins of social life. Faith exerts an ever-diminishing influence on culture and »people wish to belong to the Church, but they are strongly shaped by a vision of life which is in contrast with the faith« (Benedict XVI 2011).

However, the biggest change took place in the sphere of marital and family life. Individualism verging on the absurd destroys the Christian vision of marriage understood as *communio personarum*. Liberty is understood as anarchy and an inability to create steady relationships consequently leads to the breakup of marriage and family. Marriage suffers even greater harm due to gender ideology, suggesting that gender identity is not a result of human nature but is a socio-cultural construct. Family, according to gender ideology, is not a social unit serving the common good but is a place where the individual needs of its members are met. Hence, the family cannot be defined as it is a project of an individual, where time, gender, and duration are relative and depend on personal preferences (Porada 2014, 77–90).

According to Bahovec, »contemporary postmodern culture is so pluralistic and diverse that the features of pluralism are also expressed in Christianity« (2020, 896). Pluralism is the coexistence of diverse, often contradictory realities. In a pluralistic society, there is no place for any hierarchy of values, everything is allowed and equal. Modern pluralism is not only the existence of various options, but it is a fundamental value that is the source and goal of modern society, in which everyone can choose what they want without having to justify their choice

and without remaining faithful to values once chosen. Multiple choices and their diversity usually lead to conflicts and social unrest. Hence, in a situation of pluralism, the only guarantee for maintaining order and peace in society is tolerance, which appears as a necessary value (Mąkosa 2009, 138–139).

Cultural pluralism also has an effect on religious life in parishes. The Vatican instruction mentions mobility and digital culture, which challenge the territorial character of the parish. The pandemic brings out the need to rely on digital tools, which cannot fully replace traditional participation in the life of the Church, especially when it comes to sacraments (broadcasting a holy mass, similarly to broadcasting a gourmet dinner, cannot satiate the hunger). The religious life of the faithful in Europe is shaped by other cultural phenomena, not mentioned by Vatican instruction. This is, for instance, the dominance of a post-modern mentality present in public discourse, contesting the idea of God, as well as the notion of objective truth, rational cognition, and constant values that lie at the foundation of stable morality. All of the above have a destructive impact on faith, even if people are not aware of it. When the mentality of ‚fluid modernity‘ (Baumann 2000) is accompanied by sexual scandals among the clergy – cases of paedophilia – it is no wonder then that religious life suffers in many parishes. However, such a bad tendency could be reversed, which requires that the priests and the faithful make an effort to renew the parish.

3. Parish Renewal in the Context of the Current Circumstances of the Church in Europe

The instruction of the Congregation for the Clergy entitled „The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelizing mission of the Church“ points out that »the parish is a house among houses and is a response to the logic of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, alive and active among the community. It is visibly characterized then, as a place of worship, a sign of the permanent presence of the Risen Lord in the midst of his People.« (PC 7) Therefore, the parish cannot be crossed out from the Church’s map and replaced with another pastoral structure. For most Christians around the world, the parish is a natural place to experience the Church. Also, for Christians in Ljubljana and Warsaw, it is the parish that is the ultimate and closest location of the Church (John Paul II 1988, 26). Hence the parish should be defended and renewed so that it still plays an important role in the process of animation of religious life (Slatinek 2019, 1069). Inspired by the above-mentioned Vatican instruction, we will point towards a few directions for the renewal and strengthening of the parish community in the context of current cultural challenges facing the Church in Europe.

3.1 The Parish as a Missionary Community

The very title of the document released by the Congregation for the Clergy draws attention to a need for a missionary conversion of the priests and all the faithful.

A missionary spirit, proof of the living faith and other forms of evangelization are first and foremost a step towards the renewal and strengthening of the parish community in these challenging historical and cultural times for the Church. The Church has been paying attention to such a direction of parish renewal at least since the Second Vatican Council: »the care of souls should always be infused with a missionary spirit.« (Paul VI 1965, 30) John Paul II in a speech delivered to the members of the Congregation for the Clergy highlighted that the parish should be »making evangelization the axis of all pastoral activity since it is an urgent, preeminent and important demand« (John Paul II 1984). Benedict XVI taught that »the parish is a beacon that radiates the light of the faith and thus responds to the deepest and truest desires of the human heart, giving meaning and hope to the lives of individuals and families« (Benedict XVI 2006). Pope Francis, at the very beginning of his papacy, stated that »the parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community« (2013c, 28). There is no doubt then that the parish must be a missionary community. However, a question remains: how to complete such a task amidst the current circumstances of the Church in Europe?

The Congregation for the Clergy stresses out that »the Parish no longer being the primary gathering and social centre, as in former days, it is thus necessary to find new forms of accompaniment and closeness« (PC 14). Attempts to renew the parish community in the missionary context have been undertaken for a long time. In France, the concept of the parish as a missionary community was developed and implemented by Rev. Georges Michonneau (1899–1983), together with his colleagues from the Sons of Charity. He believed that the parish should be an open community, spreading light to the surrounding, de-christianized society. G. Michonneau was inspired to look for his own concept of renewal of the parish community by the book by H. Godin and Y. Daniel, *France, pays mission?* (Paris 1943). The authors, on the basis of sociological studies, showed the inadequacy of the available pastoral forms to the French society, which required new forms of evangelization in the context of working classes in big cities. Michonneau's views and activity were influenced by the Catholic Action, dynamically developing before the Second World War, especially its branch Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne, as well as two charity foundations established by E. Suhard, i.e. Mission de France (1941) and Mission de Paris (1943).

In 1945 G. Michonneau published a book entitled *Paroisse, communauté missionnaire*, offering a description of his concepts of the parish as a missionary community. Michonneau believed that parish pastoral care was at that time ineffective in the context of a growing process of secularization. He deemed it necessary to widen the scope of pastoral activity, from a narrow circle of those belonging to the parish to all the inhabitants of the parish area. He also claimed that the parish community can affect the distanced Christians through spreading of the Word of God, liturgy and testimony of the Christian faith. He postulated a missionary revival of the parish through the inclusion of lay people in the planning and

realization of pastoral tasks. Michonneau's teachings are filled with kerygmatic predictions and postulates to spread the Gospel not only in Churches but also in public places. He placed his hopes on the direct ministry of Catholics realized in groups of neighbours and on the parish-based religious instruction of adults. He showed appreciation for the missionary character of the liturgy. He believed that the testimony of faith and love shared by parishioners gives credibility to the parish community and directly contributes to the spread of Christianity. He attached great importance to small parish groups, especially to priests (Przygoda 2006, 482–483) when it came to missionary activity.

Michonneau's concepts were regarded after the Second World War as a brave attempt to renew the parish community. It should be acknowledged that it is still a valid strategy for strengthening the impact of the parish on a local community. However, Pope Francis noted that »the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented« (Francis 2013c, 28). Hence, the task of missionary conversion did not become outdated in the parish environment, and the instruction released by the Congregation for the Clergy states that »[i]f the Parish does not exude that spiritual dynamic of evangelization, it runs the risk of becoming self-referential and fossilized, offering experiences that are devoid of evangelical flavor and missionary drive« (PC 17). The missionary renewal of the parish requires a new approach and new pastoral solutions »so that the Word of God and the sacramental life can reach everyone in a way that is coherent with their state in life« (18).

We live in times of dynamic social and cultural changes and it is difficult to pin down one way for the missionary renewal of the parish in Europe. It seems that there are as many ways to achieve this goal as there are ideas developed by theologians of pastoral care, together with priests and lay people in a given parish. One pastoral postulate seems to be particularly adequate to the parish in general, i.e. so that the parish becomes »a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey and a centre of constant missionary outreach« (Francis 2013c, 28; PC 26).

An interesting solution is to bring back the post-baptism catechumenate, which relies on

»spreading the Christian word to those who were baptized and confirmed, in accordance to their religious consciousness and spiritual development, openness to God's word and cooperation with the Lord's Grace. The existential circumstances of a particular person should be by all means taken into account. Such an approach should lead to their genuine conversion, internal change and mature faith, always built on the foundation of baptism.« (Krakowiak 2006, 352)

A proper objective of baptism formation is the development and strengthening of all manifestations of the Christian life in specific cultural contexts. Contemporary

disciples of Christ should not only be reminded about the moral principles of conduct but also should be provided with a profound and convincing intellectual justification thereof. What is needed is attractive and tailor-made religious instruction targeted at adults. The faithful should be taught how to participate in liturgy, which binds the community. In the current circumstances, loneliness is a weakness, community is power. Religious instruction targeted at adults should make frequent references to baptism as a genuine basis and source of the Christian life. Conversion of the baptized is nothing short of renewing faith in God and the grace of baptism. It is based on such a renewal and aims at its full development. Only well-prepared and fully-fledged parishioners can be involved in missionary activity with a local community.

3.2 The Parish as a Community of Communities

According to the Second Vatican Council, the Church is a mystery of unity and community, since it is the sacrament and icon of the Holy Trinity, »a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit« (Vatican II 1964, 4). Each parish is supposed to be a sign of community, unity and Trinitarian love. The experience of results of social studies show how difficult it is for contemporary parishes to realize this Trinitarian model of interpersonal community. Many contemporary parishes resemble centers of religious service rather than communities of faith, hope, and love. Therefore, a question is raised concerning how to build a parish community in the spirit of the theology of the Second Vatican Council.

The Congregation for the Clergy indicates in the instruction that the parish – understood as a community which integrates, spreads evangelization, showing sensitivity to the poor – should become a community of communities.

»The various components that make up the Parish are called to communion and unity. When each part recognizes its complementary role in service of the community, on the one hand, we see the fulfilment of the collaborative ministry of the Parish Priest with his Assistant Priests, while on the other hand, we see how the various charisms of deacons, consecrated men and women and the laity, cooperate in building up the singular body of Christ (1 Co 12:12).« (PC 28)

The model of the parish as a community of communities is well known in Poland, due to the involvement in the parish renewal on the part of Rev. Franciszek Blachnicki and his colleagues from the Institute of Pastoral Theology at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin and the charismatic Light-Life Movement. Blachnicki's idea to renew the parish community was a methodical formation among religious adolescent and family-oriented groups, which were to consider the Word of God during weekly meetings run by lay animators and confront it with their personal experience. An important role was also to be played by a well-prepared and shared Sunday liturgy and the Eucharist. Attempts to renew the parish on the basis of the model of a community of communities were undertaken by R. Lombardi, who established the Movement for a Better World in Italy (a mo-

del of the parish as a community of neighbouring communities), P. Perini and G. Macchoni, priests of the Church of St. Eustorgius in Milan (a model of the parish as a community of smaller units – *oikos*), and lately an author of the Newpastoral.net initiative (a model of a community of parish-based home groups). A team of priests and lay assistants can always develop a new model for the renewal of the parish community on the basis of the existing group categories, apostolic teams or communities of charismatic renewal (Przygoda 2003, 130–144).

The Vatican instruction stresses that »the ,spiritual and ecclesial style of Shri-nex – which are true ,missionary outposts‘ in their own right – is not extraneous to the Parish, characterized as they are by their spirit of welcome, their life of prayer and silence that renews the spirit, the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and their care for the poor« (PC 30). In the contemporary, ever more secular society, parishes begin to perform a similar role to sanctuaries, the centers of spiritual life and beacons of hope for the poor. Today, the holy places to which at least some of the faithful make pilgrimages are parish churches. It is difficult to neglect this fact in the pastoral care strategy. According to the instruction released by the Congregation for the Clergy, charity activity should be revived not only in sanctuaries but also in parishes as they are:

»the first place of personal human encounter that the poor have with the face of the Church. Priests, deacons and consecrated men and women are among the first to have compassion for the ‘wounded flesh’ of their brothers and sisters, to visit the sick, to support the unemployed and their families, thereby opening the door to those in need. With their gaze fixed upon them, the Parish community evangelises and is evangelised by the poor, discovering anew the call to preach the Word in all settings, whilst recalling the ,supreme law‘ of charity, by which we shall all be judged.« (33)

Hence, the renewal of the parish understood as a community of communities requires not only taking care of spiritual development and animation of all the religious groups within a parish but also caring for the horizontal relationships between parishioners. What is needed to achieve this goal is a pattern of sanctuary functioning, being the centers of spiritual life, model liturgy and radiating love in reference to the poor, those in need of material, psychological, social, and spiritual support (Ujházi 2020, 792–793). The pandemic limited the possibilities of sanctuaries affecting the faithful, which should motivate parish priests to take some forms of pastoral care previously available in sanctuaries.

3.3 The Parish as a Community of Service Based on Co-responsibility

The Vatican instruction reminds us of a postulate of pastoral conversion and renewal of the parish’s mission through the words of Pope Francis. A question is raised: how to achieve this goal given the diminishing number of priests at the parish? Priests get older, retire, cannot take the pressure, experience moral and ethical doubts. After the Second Vatican Council, great hopes were placed on the renewal of the

permanent diaconate, which indeed took place in 1972, and on greater opportunities to be involved in the parish life and pastoral care of the laity. Deacons are in fact ordained to serve, and cannot obtain the sacrament of priesthood. They can assist bishops and presbyters but cannot replace them, i.e. they cannot celebrate masses, hear other's confession, perform last rites or become parish priests. This is the result not of legal but theological issues. The parish priest is a representative of the diocesan bishop as a visible head of the local Church. There is a subtle bond between the bishop and the parish, without which the parish could not become a realization of the Church, and consequently would become an out-of-Church being. That is why the parish priest cannot be a lay or consecrated person. Being ordained at least as a presbyter is an absolute condition to represent the visible head of the Church in a parish. The Vatican instruction reminds us about such an important premise of fulfilling the role of a parish priest, especially in the context of recent experiments and attempts to solve the problem of vacant positions of parish priests in various corners of the world. Not all of these attempts were successful and acceptable. The Vatican instruction rectifies certain misuses in running a parish, which were noted in some of the local Churches, through the strengthening of the role of a parish priest, which can be only an ordained steward (PC 66–74).

Although the parish priest is »the pastor of the Parish entrusted to him« (CIC, can. 519), it does not mean that he is the only one responsible for the animation of religious life in the parish. The Congregation for the Clergy warns against the mistake of clericalizing pastoral activity and affirms that »the whole community, and not simply the hierarchy, is the responsible agent of mission, since the Church is identified as the entire People of God« (PC 38). Each parish community consists mostly of the lay faithful, whose essential vocation and mission is to »to strive that earthly realities and all human activity may be transformed by the Gospel« (85). There is no return from the model of co-responsibility for pastoral care and parish apostleship. Therefore, it is vital to create new and support the already existing finance and pastoral councils in the parish.

A keyword for the proper functioning of the finance councils in the parish is co-responsibility for the materialistic goods of the Church. This area of parish life shows links with evangelization, since as Pope Francis noted »[m]oney contributes greatly to many good works for the development of the human race« (2013b). The instruction offers encouragement to establish a finance council in each parish that should consist of at least three people, and which, under the supervision of the parish priest, would handle financial and legal issues. The Congregation for the Clergy hopes that the council will play »a role of particular importance in the growth, at the level of the Parish community, of a culture of co-responsibility, of administrative transparency, and of service to the needs of the Church« (PC 106). Transparency of its actions, attained, among others, by publishing the annual financial report presented to the local ordinary, can contribute to the credibility and reliability of the Church. The financial council should consist of the skilled and competent lay faithful, who will not only help to run the finances of the parish but also find new ways of finding funds for investments and pastoral enterprises.

It seems that an even more significant role in the process of building the parish as a co-responsible community is played by the Pastoral Parish Council. Pope Francis is convinced that neither the bishop nor the parish priest may run the diocese without the Pastoral Parish Council (Francis 2013a). The Council is written in the constitutive reality of the Church and it contributes to the development of the spirit of the communion. The diversity of charisms and services available in the parish, which stem from the inclusion into Christ and gifts from the Holy Spirit, cannot be subject to uniformity in order to become »uniformity, where everyone has to do everything together and in the same way, always thinking alike« (2017). The Pastoral Council »highlights and realizes the centrality of the People of God as the subject and active protagonist of the evangelising mission, in virtue of the fact that every member of the faithful has received the gifts of the Spirit through Baptism and Confirmation« (PC 110). The Vatican document states that the main function of the Pastoral Council is »to investigate everything pertaining to pastoral activities, to weigh them carefully and to set forth practical conclusions concerning them so as to promote conformity of the life and actions of the People of God with the Gospel« (110). Moreover, it recommends that the Pastoral Council should »should consist for the most part of those who have effective responsibility in the pastoral life of the Parish, or who are concretely engaged in it, in order to avoid the meetings becoming an exchange of abstract ideas that do not take into account the real life of the community, with its resources and problems« (114).

A challenge for the Church in Europe is to be an ecclesial formation, which should acknowledge Pope Francis' recommendations concerning co-responsibility, dialogue and cooperation in the missionary activity of the Church consisting of priests, clerics, and the laity. It is necessary to get rid of the dominant, at least in some local Churches located in Central-Eastern Europe, an individualistic vision of redemption for the sake of an inclusive, integrating and communion-based vision. The parish is the priority environment in which the vision should be brought into life. Therefore, it is not the parish priest alone but he together with the support of the Parish Council that should be the cornerstone of unity and communion in the parish. Despite all difficulties that may arise in appointing and leading a team of the faithful, the Parish Council is indispensable for the parish to become a dynamic structure, changing in accordance with social, cultural, and religious circumstances and able to respond adequately to new challenges.

4. Conclusions

What are the main conclusions and postulates that may hint at possible directions for the renewal of the parish community in Europe under the current cultural circumstances? It is important not to be focused categorically on the number of the faithful but rather concentrate on the quality of their faith, i.e. the quality of their relationship with God's people. If parishes are to be the centers of spiritual life and the hubs of the Church's renewal mission, pastoral care should revolve

around various ways of formation leading to sanctity. The sanctity, based on love, should be evidenced through marriages and families, and then in the local community, the environment of life, work, and leisure.

In light of the instruction released by the Congregation for the Clergy, parishes should undoubtedly attempt to extend the number of the pro-active faithful engaged in various forms of Christian life and apostleship. It is strictly intertwined with the establishment and animation of the finance and pastoral councils. It is still necessary for both priests and the laity to look for new forms of pre-evangelization and evangelization, adjusted to specific parish communities. It is a challenge, not only during the coronavirus pandemic, to take care of the poor, the sick, and the unemployed, »whilst recalling the ‚supreme law‘ of charity, by which we shall all be judged« (PC 33).

In order to renew the parish in line with the missionary message, it is vital to animate the testimony of the authentically Christian life of priests, clerics, catechists, spouses, parents, and all other parishioners. What is more, an atmosphere of calm and tranquillity should be cultivated, together with regular praying and adoration of the Host. Last but not least, activity taken outside of the parish ought to be considered. Namely, other parishes should be taken care of, especially in the missionary countries that are in need of financial, organizational, personal and spiritual support. The Church is not restricted by space or limited to ‚our parish‘. This postulate could be extended also to parishes of other Christian denominations and other religious communities.

Abbreviations

CIC – Codex Iuris Canonici 1983.

PC – Congregation for the Clergy 2020 [Pastoral conversion].

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