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The Application of Psychotherapeutic Interventions into Pastoral Practice: Possibilities and Reflections

Uporaba psihoterapevtskih intervencij v pastoralni praksi: možnosti in razmisleki

Abstract: Pastoral theology is seeking new forms of evangelisation to address people in the postmodern socio-cultural context and help them recognise the richness of the spiritual tradition. According to the principle of 'logoi spermatikoi', theology must open itself to the insights of some other disciplines, implement them and enrich them with its own content. Pastoral theology may find an important interlocutor in psychotherapy, which has developed working methods that are very attractive for people nowadays, addressing their individuality, putting their personal experience at the centre, strengthening their sense of autonomy and ability to form good relationships, and helping them use and regulate their emotions in their daily lives. We propose attachment theory as the starting point for the application of psychotherapeutic interventions in pastoral practice. Attachment theory is having a major impact on the development of contemporary psychotherapy and is also increasingly finding expression in contemporary Christian anthropology. The application of psychotherapeutic interventions in pastoral practice can make an important contribution to establishing a secure relationship between the pastoral worker and the believer, creating a foundation for sincere dialogue and spiritual accompaniment. In this article we present some basic psychotherapeutic interventions, their potential application in pastoral practice, and the expected effects of their use. We draw attention to some ethical dilemmas, to the importance of the safe transfer of interventions in pastoral care, and to the need for research to show the real effects of the use of these interventions in practice.

Keywords: pastoral practice, post-modern approach, psychotherapeutic interventions, attachment theory, ethics in pastoral care

Povzetek: Pastoralna teologija išče nove poti oznanjevanja, ki bodo nagovarjale človeka v postmodernem sociokulturnem kontekstu in mu pomagale prepoznati bogastvo duhovnega izročila. Po načelu 'logoi spermatikoi' se mora teologija odpreti spoznanjem nekaterih drugih disciplin, jih implementirati in obogatiti z njej lastno vsebino. Pomembnega sogovornika lahko pastoralna teologija najde tudi v psihoterapiji. Ta je razvila za sodobnega človeka zelo privlačne metode dela, s katerimi

naslavlja njegovo individualnost, v ospredje postavlja njegovo osebno izkušnjo, krepi njegov občutek za avtonomijo in sposobnost za oblikovanje kakovostnih odnosov ter mu pomaga uporabljati in uravnnavati čustva v vsakodnevem življenju. Za izhodišče aplikacije psihoterapevtskih intervencij v pastoralno prakso postavimo teorijo navezanosti, ki zelo pomembno vpliva na razvoj sodobne psihoterapije, vse bolj pa prihaja do izraza tudi v sodobni krščanski antropologiji. Aplikacija psihoterapevtskih intervencij v pastoralno prakso lahko pomembno prispeva pri vzpostavljanju varnega odnosa med pastoralnim delavcem in vernikom, kar ustvarja temelj za iskren dialog in poglobljeno duhovno spremljanje. V prispevku predstavimo nekatere temeljne psihoterapevtske intervencije, njihovo potencialno uporabnost v pastoralni praksi ter predvidene učinke njihove uporabe. Opozorimo na nekatere etične dileme aplikacije, na pomen varnega prenosa intervencij v pastoralno in na potrebo po raziskavah, ki bodo pokazale na dejanske učinke uporabe teh intervencij v praksi.

Ključne besede: pastoralna praksa, postmoderna pristop, psihoterapevtske intervencije, teorija navezanosti, etika v pastoralni

1. Introduction

The task of pastoral theology is to find ways to reach contemporary man. When the Church Fathers spread the good news of Christianity in the first centuries, they drew heavily on the metaphors, stories, literature, philosophy, and mythology of their time, speaking in the conceptual language of their cultural milieu and adding new content (Svetelj 2022, 169). The same is true for the pastoral practice of today – it must take into account the post-modern cultural context in which modern man is deeply integrated. The postmodern worldview places the individual at the centre, focusing on the individual's experience on which their reality is based. An individual's reality, knowledge and values are shaped by their unique cultural, political, religious, and historical contexts. Therefore, in spirituality the individual no longer relies so much on institutional authority or religious tradition, but rather on self-awareness, personal conviction and experience, deeper motivation, and a more holistic form of cognition that also includes one's own views and past experiences (172–173). Pastoral ministry will therefore reach contemporary believers more easily if it addresses them in the depth of their experience, their search for meaning and their authentic search for personal answers to the fundamental questions concerning their deepest pain and longing. Pope Francis also encourages such an approach – at least implicitly (AL, 3–41) – referring to the synodal report on pastoral challenges in the family (RS, 5–8), which addresses the postmodern socio-cultural context. Given the postmodern context, it is not a naïve secularised rejection of the traditional (Vodičar 2020, 253–255) but a fundamental pastoral challenge to translate the wisdom and richness of tradition into a language that will reach contemporary men and women. As Pope Francis says, the Church is expected to make a missionary conversion. It is no longer primarily a question of giving instructions, but of the Church presenting its values and enabling people to expe-

rience that the Gospel remains the answer to their deepest expectations (AL, 201).

Pastoral workers encounter believers who find themselves in very complex situations of personal distress. Distress can manifest itself on many levels – physical, psychological, relational, moral, spiritual, and so on. Echoing Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1987), pastoral workers are frequently called to listen to more basic needs before addressing the spiritual-moral level of experience of the believer in distress (Delkeskamp-Heys 2010, 80). The basic needs of people nowadays include a safe and compassionate relationship, being understood in a concrete life situation, and being accepted in the way they experience life and the emotions they feel. Pastoral care based on a traditionalist approach is losing its appeal and persuasiveness because it does not address these basic needs effectively enough. Some therefore find that in recent decades its place has been taken, at least in part, by psychotherapy and its methods, which are better suited to the postmodern experience. Nowadays, people are seeking the meaning of their existence in their individuality, their inner and personal experience, and their emotions and authentic relationships (Svetelj 2022, 173–176). Psychotherapy has developed effective techniques that allow psychotherapists to access an individual's inner self, answering some of the basic needs for acceptance, security, and closeness, but psychotherapy cannot offer definitive answers to the question of the meaning of human existence. Christianity, on the other hand, offers fundamental answers to the question of human existence, but often remains trapped in traditionalism and fails to adequately approach individuals in their postmodern reality.

2. Can Psychotherapy inform Pastoral Practice?

In order for pastoral practice to be able to fully exploit its potential and better reach people in this modern age, it must follow the principle of "*logoi spermatikoi*" (Kasper 2011, 5) in opening itself up to other disciplines that seek to approach people in their experience and suffering, and to receive and ennoble the seeds of truth that have sprouted in these fields (Petkovšek 2019, 25–26). Pope Francis encourages theologians and pastoral workers to do the same in his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. He stresses the importance of pastoral workers receiving comprehensive and interdisciplinary training that is in line with disciplines such as psychology, pedagogy, medicine, social work, marital therapy, and counselling (AL, 202–204; 280). In line with this view, our discussion intends to show that basic knowledge of some of the fundamental building blocks of the psychotherapeutic method – psychotherapeutic interventions – can also help prepare pastoral workers for the work of alleviating suffering, and helping believers find personal meaning and establish a secure relationship with God.

Human suffering is the entry point for psychotherapy as well as for all pastoral and practical theology. One of the tasks of theology is to seek answers to the meaning of human suffering and to bring hope, and one of the tasks of pastoral theology, or of practical theology as a whole, is to create a safe space and to develop healing and redemptive responses to the afflictions of suffering believers (Cooper-

White 2012, 23–24; Platovnjak 2021, 692). There has been fruitful communication between the various psychotherapeutic modalities and Christianity or Christian spirituality for decades. There have been numerous discussions on the integration of spirituality and religion in psychotherapeutic practice (Kelly 1995; Tan 2003; Cashwell and Young 2011). Similarly, individual psychotherapeutic modalities have already adapted their methods to pastoral counselling (Kollar 1997).

Some authors (Frederick 2009; Johnson 2018; Johnson and Sanderfer 2016) have drawn attention to the complexity of the relationship between religiosity and psychotherapy. Many clients also struggle with issues of spirituality. They wish to be helped by a therapist with a similar worldview who is therefore better equipped for dealing with their spiritual challenges and can more fully understand their experience (Frederick 2009, 352; Jaworski 2018, 25). As Frederick shows in his analysis, different psychotherapeutic modalities have different anthropological foundations, which may be in direct dissonance with Christian anthropology. This can confuse or frighten the believer, as it can contradict their worldview. Any form of psychotherapy or pastoral counselling that uses psychotherapeutic interventions must therefore be sensitive to the client's worldview (Frederick 2009, 353). The application of psychotherapeutic interventions to pastoral practice is therefore only meaningful when these interventions do not contradict the fundamental anthropological premises of the Christian worldview. As we will show below, attachment theory can be a useful anthropological framework for understanding the points of contact between the psychotherapeutic method and pastoral practice. Using a selection of psychotherapeutic interventions that are consistent with a Christian worldview, we will show how they can be used effectively by pastoral workers in pastoral practice to help develop secure interpersonal relationships and a relationship with God.

3. Attachment Theory as a Common Ground in Psychotherapy and Postmodern Pastoral Practice

In attachment theory it is possible to identify common ground between contemporary, relational forms of psychotherapy and pastoral practice that addresses the individual in their postmodern reality. Attachment theory (Bowlby 1969; Ainsworth 1985) has greatly influenced the humanities and social sciences over the past five decades with its explanation of important interpersonal relationships. Bowlby and Ainsworth found that attachment relationships are characterised by strong and enduring emotional bonds. Attachment relationships are characterised by the development of relatively stable and enduring patterns of experiencing oneself and others in the relationship. Bowlby (1973, 203) called this the internal working model. It helps the individual anticipate and understand their environment, employ survival behaviours, and establish a psychological sense of security (Pietromonaco and Feldman Barrett 2000, 155). Depending on the predictability, emotional responsiveness, and emotional regulation capacity of attachment figures in the early

years of life, children can develop different forms of secure or insecure attachment. Secure attachment has been shown to be associated with higher quality of life in various domains, and this is also true for the quality of interpersonal relationships across the lifespan (Rubinstein, Tziner and Bilig 2012, 151–155).

Attachment theory is increasingly being used as a basis for various psychotherapeutic modalities, such as attachment-based family therapy or emotionally focused therapy, which aim to raise awareness and transform dangerous forms of attachment into secure ones (Hughes 2007; Wallin 2007; Jerebic and Jerebic 2018; Johnson 2019; Erzar 2022; Furrow et al. 2022). In psychotherapy, a secure attachment is established both by drawing attention to and transforming the dynamics of important relationships in an individual's life, as well as in the therapeutic relationship itself. Its characteristics (predictability, security, empathy and addressing of emotions, acceptance of the client's experience, appropriate boundaries, trust in the client, etc.) become – at least temporarily – a relationship of attachment, which serves to transform the individual's internal working model. The psychotherapeutic relationship is very much focused on the individual's subjective experience, their concrete life situation, personal progress, and interpersonal relationships, which are the areas that most appeal to postmodern men and women.

In this paper we aim to show that by applying psychotherapeutic interventions to pastoral practice, pastoral workers can help many believers experience a secure relationship that will stimulate a transformation in their inner working model. By employing such interventions, pastoral workers enable believers to experience security, acceptance and understanding. This is a very important step on the path of spiritual accompaniment because believers usually do not share their experience honestly and are not prepared to deepen their personal faith in dialogue with the spiritual director until they feel they are in a secure relationship. The experience of a secure relationship between a priest or pastoral worker and a believer can become a starting point for reflecting on other relationships in the believer's life and for building more secure relationships with people close to them, the Christian community (Jerebic 2020) and God (Kaufman 1981, 67; Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990; 1992; Kirkpatrick 2005; Granquist 2010). Developing a secure attachment to God – who is himself vulnerable (Bošnjaković 2022, 288; Globokar 2022, 11), tender (Simonič 2018, 214) and attuned (Stepišnik Perdih 2020, 230) becomes a lasting source of inner peace for the believer (cf. Jn 4:14). For the (postmodern) believer, God experienced in this way can become a person of secure attachment, a secure base and a safe haven (Clinton and Stinraub 2010, 83–94; Johnson and Sanderfer 2016, 252–256).

4. Initial Instances of Applying Psychotherapeutic Interventions in Pastoral Practice

The synodal assembly of bishops stressed that a contemporary pastoral approach should begin by listening attentively to the socio-cultural context in which the

particular believer finds themselves (RS 5–11). It must be taken into account that the individual lives in the postmodern context with all its advantages and challenges (RS 5–8). Nowadays people want to take better care of themselves, enjoy good interpersonal relationships and be in harmony with their emotions (RS 9). These characteristics of modern man are also reflected in pastoral care. The faithful first want to be heard and accepted in their situation. They want sensitive responses so they can open up and begin to trust the relationship with the pastoral worker before embarking with them on a deep spiritual journey. The experience of empathy is crucial (Simonič 2020, 320). An unconditional positive and empathic view of the person seeking help is also one of the basic postulates of the psychotherapeutic method that is so attractive to modern man (Rogers 1957, 98–99; Svetelj 2021, 174–176). Below we will make a pilot presentation of some basic psychotherapeutic interventions and their application to pastoral practice to demonstrate how they can help pastoral workers establish basic trust and a secure relationship. These interventions encourage the first but essential step in the pastoral care for a believer's spiritual journey.

By presenting and inviting pastoral workers to use the following six therapeutic interventions, we aim to help them avoid reacting insensitively. This is often an obstacle to building accepting, empathic, authentic, and safe interpersonal relationships: being (too) quick to give advice, judging or criticising a believer's actions or beliefs, not giving enough of a feeling of understanding and acceptance, comparing with other people, not being sufficiently open to an individual's feelings, thoughts, and experiences, etc.

4.1 Empathic Reflection

In empathic reflection (Furrow et al. 2022, 71) the pastoral worker tries to summarise the believer's painful experience in a compassionate way. In doing so, they focus on the believer's most emotionally and morally intense messages that are full of pain and unrelieved feelings. They are also attentive to the believer's body language. They do not (yet) focus on what is right or wrong in what the believer has told them, but merely reflect, describe, and explain the content of the message, the experience, and the resulting dynamic (Johnson 2004, 78–79).

An example of application: "I can understand the pain you must feel to have lost contact with your son. You say you are afraid he will go astray and suffer greatly, and that you will not have access to him to stand by his side. Your whole body is trembling as you describe this affliction of yours."

Expected effect: After hearing this reflection, the individual feels heard and understood, and begins to feel the pastoral worker is a safe person, an ally. The reflection on the experience makes it easier for the believer to turn their attention to the development of their inner experience, to connect with their feelings and to name them. When someone sympathises with them, their feelings are recognised, accepted and they begin to calm down. It gradually becomes easier to recognise the pattern of their experience or action.

4.2 Validation

Validation is used to communicate acceptance of an individual's experience and to normalise their current experience (Johnson et al. 2005, 61). The pastoral worker will not judge the appropriateness of the believer's experience but will seek to explain why this is their experience in a given case. It is important to note that validation is not objective affirmation of the correctness of a certain way of thinking or behaving, but a willingness to accept the believer's subjective perception and to understand why this way of experiencing, thinking, and behaving occurs in a particular situation (Johnson 2004, 68–69).

An example of application: "It is perfectly understandable that you feel angry with God about what has happened to you. Anger is a natural reaction to such a tragic event because the water has swept away everything you spent decades building, and now all that is left is devastation and bank loans."

Expected effect: By embracing the believer's experience, the relationship between the pastoral worker and the believer is built and deepened. This intervention helps the believer to continue sharing emotional experiences, knowing that the pastoral worker is prepared to understand the wider context, the triggers, and the feedback loops within which the believer's experiences and reactions have taken place. This reduces the believer's need to withdraw, to conceal the actual experience and other defensive responses. This intervention is the first step in encouraging the believer to connect with their emotional experience, their dysfunctional or sinful pattern, to explore it with safe accompaniment, and to be freed from it as a result. It can also help promote a secure attachment to God as the person of attachment, as it presents Him as the one who best understands and supports the believer in the experience of suffering.

4.3 Evocative Responding

The aim of this intervention is to evoke the feelings, thoughts, and images that the pastoral worker senses in the individual, but which are not yet fully articulated, conscious, or accepted. The pastoral worker can use evocative responding to help the believer express emotions that are otherwise expressed non-verbally (Johnson and Campbell 2021, 95). Open questions play a very important role in evocative responding, as they invite the believer to reflect on their feelings. The use of images or metaphors is also evocative (Johnson 2004, 80–82).

An example of application: After the husband has expressed regret at having cheated on his wife and looks at her uncomfortably, the priest says: "How does it feel to make eye-contact with your wife now? What do you feel?"

Expected effect: In this intervention, the believer becomes increasingly in touch with their senses, more easily connecting their bodily reactions to their emotions. Through such responses, the pastoral worker helps the believer get to the core of their experiences and emotions.

4.4 Heightening Emotions

The pastoral worker uses this intervention to highlight and intensify some of the believer's reactions or interpersonal interactions. It can be a case of highlighting or raising awareness about certain emotions and negative or destructive interpersonal interactions, but also draws attention to new, constructive steps in the believer's life. The pastoral worker achieves these effects by repeating certain phrases, using non-verbal language to emphasize the meaning of a particular response, and images and metaphors to sharpen a particular experience, to refocus on a particular theme, and so on (Johnson 2004, 82–84; Johnson et al. 2005, 67).

An example of application: The priest leans slightly towards the believer, lowers his voice, looks compassionately into the believer's eyes, and repeats the believer's words: "You say, I'm afraid I won't be able to do it. Afraid I won't be able to do it. Like you've been carrying a heavy rucksack for years and you can't put it down. Even more quietly and more slowly: Weight, burden, effort, exhaustion... Like Jesus falling under the weight of the cross."

Expected effect: The intervention that deepens or intensifies the emotional experience allows the individual to get even more in touch with an experience they previously found difficult to put into words or evaluate. The pastoral worker uses this intervention to give a sense of security and encourages the believer to fully express, feel and explore a particular experience in an empathic relationship, and then to find new, more appropriate, relieving, reassuring responses to that experience.

4.5 Empathic Conjecture

In this intervention the pastoral worker assumes a certain need for attachment and emotional experience, which the believer may not be aware of or may not have mentioned (Furrow et al. 2022, 77). It focuses on key parts of the experience which the believer has not yet been able to put into words, but which are indicated by the believer's non-verbal expression and their relational situation. The pastoral worker is ready to accept the believer's corrections regarding their conjecture. They do not impose their own view but respond authentically from their point of view. Through empathic conjecture they help the believer expand and deepen their understanding of their own experience, not so much by cognitive interpretation, but rather by stimulating an experience that spontaneously leads to new understandings and insights.

An example of application: "When you talk like this about being caught in the pornography trap, I wonder how lonely and alienated you must feel in this predicament. It's as if you've been waiting for a long time for a warm embrace, the feeling of acceptance when someone really loves you for who you are."

Expected effect: As the pastoral worker helps the believer find words to describe their feelings and emotions, the believer gains better understanding of their inner world, their needs, and the way they cope with distress. Above all, this intervention encourages the believer to recognise their needs for attachment to others and to God, thus expanding the possibilities for more functional problem-solving.

4.6 Catching the 'Bullet'

Catching the bullet is an intervention used when an aggressive remark is made by one of the family members and the pastoral worker responds with an empathic conjecture to skilfully catch the 'bullet' before it hits someone, triggering a reaction of self-protective distancing or a retaliatory attack. The need for this intervention often arises when family members begin to share more painful experiences with each other. In certain situations, the pastoral worker can protect the believer from themselves when the believer begins to accuse themselves excessively (Furrow et al. 2022, 80–81).

An example of application: In a conversation between a priest and a family, a young man (Michael) sincerely admits doubting God's existence. The parents react indignantly that this is not the way they brought him up, and one can sense great unease. The priest senses the pressure that the parents have put on the youngster by exposing him and tries to catch the 'bullet': "Michael, I'm glad you shared your thoughts with us so honestly. It's perfectly understandable that you have such doubts, and I'm glad you're looking for your own answers to these important questions. If you want, we can discuss this some other time. Parents, I think you can be proud to have such a reflective and sincere son."

Expected effect: Through this intervention, the pastoral worker prevents the family members or other interlocutors from hurting each other (or themselves) by reacting insensitively. This is especially important in moments of vulnerability when feelings are shared very sincerely. Through this intervention the pastoral worker creates a secure relationship, gains the believer's trust, and helps build an open and honest relationship with him.

The applications of psychotherapeutic interventions to pastoral practice we have presented above illustrate the ways in which they can help pastoral workers establish safe and compassionate relationships with believer. We have made attachment theory the basis for integrating psychotherapeutic interventions into pastoral practice, as it exerts a significant influence on contemporary psychotherapy and is becoming increasingly important in evaluating the crucial importance of a personal, authentic relationship between the believer and God (Clinton and Straub 2010, 83–94). The appropriate and skilful application of these interventions makes it possible for the believer to feel accepted by the pastoral worker in their life situation, heard in their experience, and secure enough to continue sharing their experience honestly. In this way, a person anchored in a postmodern cultural context can more easily open up to the key messages of the faith and discover meanings that will encourage them to search for authentic, personal answers to them.

5. Some Ethical Considerations and Further Recommendations

The application of psychotherapeutic interventions in pastoral practice also requires reflection concerning possible ethical dilemmas. Psychotherapeutic interven-

tions are powerful tools used by psychotherapists to establish good therapeutic relationships with clients, to make them aware of and able to process their emotions, to establish secure interpersonal bonds, to strengthen compassion for self and others, to deepen contact with oneself and to help clients find personal meaning. Incompetent or inappropriate use of psychotherapeutic interventions can therefore cause significant long-term damage, and the pastoral worker can injure or severely burden the believer. While recognising the obvious benefits of transferring psychotherapeutic interventions into pastoral practice, we also point out that this transfer must take place in a controlled manner, including appropriate education and training of pastoral workers.

In this context, we also propose some recommendations for further research in this area. Our discussion presents a pilot example of the use of psychotherapeutic interventions adapted for use in pastoral practice. Thorough analysis is still needed on the applicability of many other psychotherapeutic interventions of different modalities that could be useful in pastoral work. It is also necessary to reflect on how these interventions should be adapted for pastoral practice in order to avoid harmful use, as they are used in a different context and may also have different effects. A qualitative study should be carried out on the effects of the intentional and competent use of psychotherapeutic interventions in pastoral practice.

6. Conclusion

In our discussion, we have addressed the questions of why and how psychotherapeutic interventions can be useful in pastoral practice. It is important that pastoral practice seeks new and effective forms of evangelisation. Psychotherapy has developed methods that are very appealing to the modern person as they lend an ear to individuality, help people find contact with themselves and those close to them, focus on their position in the world, and support them in their search for a personal mission and meaning in life. However, psychotherapy does not in itself provide answers to fundamental questions about human existence, which is in the domain of religion. The latter must adapt its pastoral activity to the post-modern reality in which we live and to approach people in ways that address them more personally. Following the ancient principle of *logoi spermatikoi*, it can also help itself by learning about psychotherapeutic methods and applying them to pastoral practice. We found the foundations for such a translation of psychotherapeutic interventions into pastoral practice in attachment theory, which underlies many contemporary psychotherapeutic modalities and is also close to Christian anthropology. This is confirmed by a growing body of research on the role and importance of forming secure attachments in the believer's interpersonal relationships and in their relationship with God. In this paper, we have presented the applicability of some psychotherapeutic interventions to pastoral practice and showed how their use enhances the believer's healthy relationship with self, their neighbours and

God. In addition to the obvious opportunities for pastoral practice, we also pointed out the danger of naive use of psychotherapeutic interventions in the pastoral ministry and stressed the importance of adequate training for pastoral workers to use them competently. Further analyses of the applicability of the transfer of interventions and thorough research into the use of these interventions in pastoral practice will show the real positive and possible negative effects of applying psychotherapeutic interventions to pastoral practice.

Abbreviations

AL – Francis 2016 [Amoris Laetitia].

RS – The Synod of Bishops 2014 [Relatio Synodi].

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