

echoes

FROM THE CHURCH
IN CENTRAL AND
EASTERN EUROPE

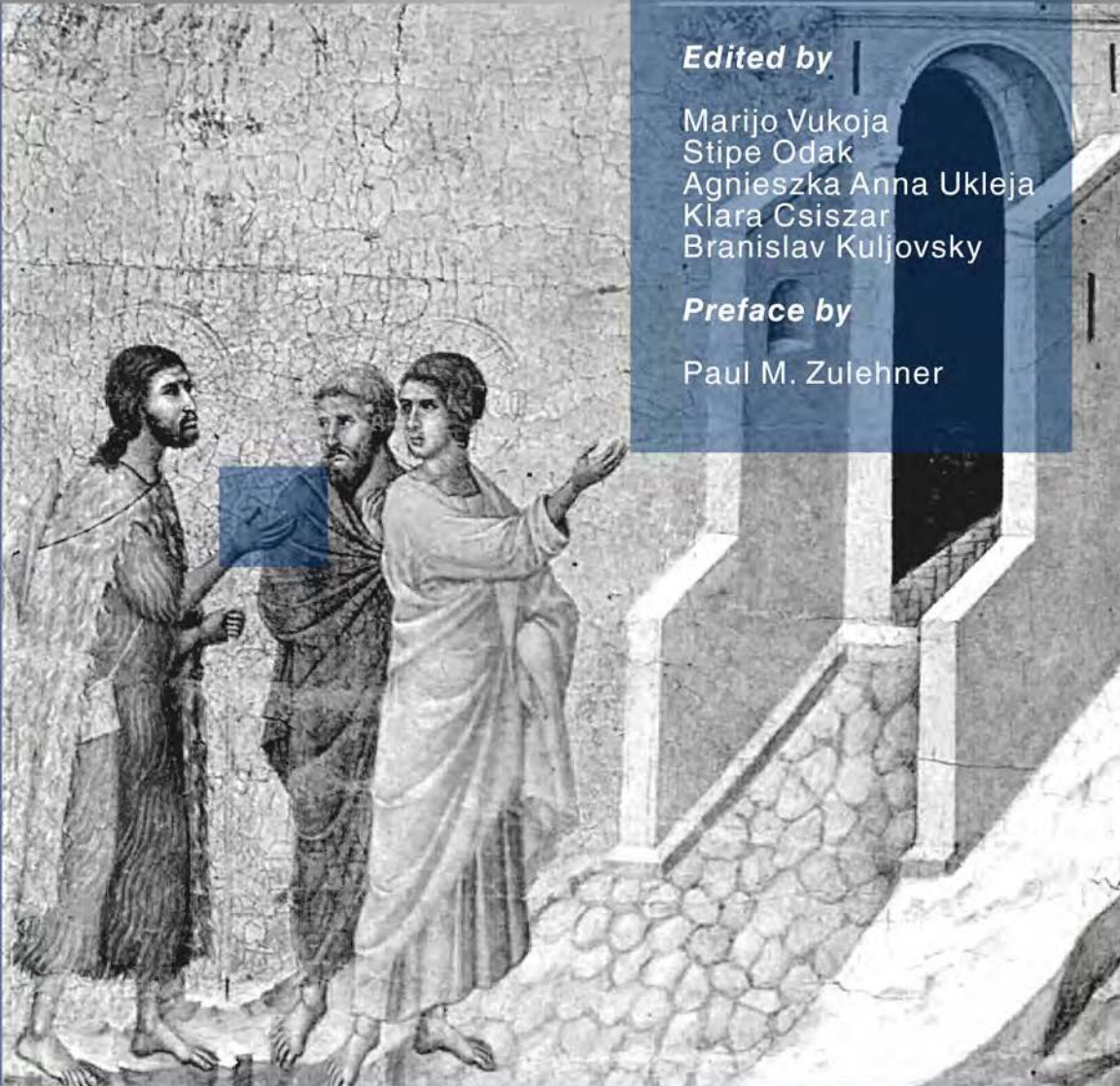
Is There a Place for Me in the Church?

Edited by

Marijo Vukoja
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Preface by

Paul M. Zulehner



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Interviews and Essays

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Echoes Network

Series: *The Echoes from the Church in Central and Eastern Europe*

Is There a Place for Me in the Church?: Interviews and Essays

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Is There a Place for Me in the Church? allows us to listen to people from Central and Eastern Europe who describe their experiences of faith and their relationship with the Church. Just as Jesus came not for the healthy but for the sick, so in these interviews and essays the focus is on people who have experienced difficulty and suffering while trying to live out their faith.

In the Jubilee Year of Mercy, the stories recounted here provide us with a precious resource for our prayer and reflection, so that we may ask God to show us how His mercy may be made visible in situations such as these. With God's grace, the Church can find new ways forward that are both faithful to the Gospel and the living tradition of the Church and that include those on the margins of the Church.

The striking example of Mario, whose interview opens part II of the book, gives a practical example of this hope, also captured by Pope Francis in a quotation from John Paul II: "The Holy Spirit can be said to possess an infinite creativity, proper to the divine mind, which knows how to loosen the knots of human affairs, even the most complex and inscrutable." (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 178)

***Sr Helen Alford OP, Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences
and Ordinary Professor of Economic Ethics
at the Pontifical University of St Thomas (Angelicum), Rome***

When I started reading the interviews and essays collected in this volume, I was reminded of an experience I had two years ago. At that time, I was browsing through hundreds of answers Flemish Catholics had provided in response to the questionnaire that the Vatican had distributed in preparation for the imminent Extraordinary Bishops' Synod on the Family in 2014. The longer I immersed myself in these individual testimonies, the more I was absorbed by them. Reading one after the other, I simply could not stop; I was compelled by some invisible force to go on. I was fascinated by the personal life stories and the interior worlds they revealed, while a more 'professional' interest was directed at finding some common patterns in the respondents' moral insights with regard to issues of sexuality, marriage, and family life. I guess that what finally kept me from closing my reading and arriving at some viable conclusion was precisely that individual experiences can hardly be categorized under a common denominator. The next story you read is likely to invalidate the pattern you thought you had just discovered. And still, at the end, you get the impression that you have learned something substantially new from all these various and often divergent responses.

That is exactly what the editors of this collection of testimonies must be congratulated for.

Is There a Place for Me in the Church? offers a broad variety of individual stories and reflections that yield fascinating insights both into the lived religiosity and the situation of institutionalized religion in Central and Eastern Europe. It will be up to further sociological and theological research to show stable patterns in this rich and colorful picture. This kind of groundwork is needed more than ever in contemporary theology because it provides us with a genuine *locus theologicus*.

Thomas Knieps-Port le Roi, Leuven

The question itself seems very intriguing. My first reaction and answer would be: "Of course there is a place for everyone in the Church!" But the more I think about it, the more I get confused with different feelings and thoughts.

I strongly believe that there is an inborn sensitivity, a religious need in every person, to be open for and to others, and finally to be open to the Great Other whom I call God. For me, openness to God is always a matter of freedom. A mature, fully personal openness and response to the Other can occur only in freedom. If it is out of any other motivations, this contact can be real, but it may not bring as much satisfaction and happiness as if it were brought about by a free choice and free realization of religiosity. God created us for freedom!

For people born in Central and Eastern European countries, freedom is a precious, albeit new experience. Twenty-five years after the Fall of the Berlin Wall, we see that our communities and the Church are not always open and including communities. This happens often if the main-stream group of the Church imposes too strong of a disciplinary approach on people who seek to realize in their own way the precious gift of religious feeling in a 'non-orthodox' way. Law and tradition must go hand in hand with love, openness, and mercy; only in this way can the Church become a place for everyone.

Through my whole adult life as a religious person, missionary, priest, and now bishop, I have tried to meet every person where he or she is. This can happen only with a great openness and respect for others, which is connected with a determination to reach out to every person. These encounters shape my pastoral sensibility and activities. I am sure it is possible to enter into a good personal communication with every person.

I will close my thoughts with a Gospel quotation: [Jesus said] "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full." (John 10,10b.) I wish for the Church to be a place of life, love, and mercy! I wish for every person who took part in this project to find his or her place in the Church!

I express my deep gratitude to all who took part in this project, and for the extraordinary result, which came at the end of the common journey of editors and others who had the courage to share with us the story of their lives.

Dr. Ladislav Nemet SVD, Bishop of Zrenjanin

The questioning title of this book poignantly represents the agony, yet also the resilience and hope, of each of the 47 contributors who confide, in a series of remarkable interviews, about the deep pain they have experienced within the Church, as their life-experience collides with its teachings and representatives. The interviewees speak candidly of their painful encounters with the reality of lay experience in the Church, as they find it in hypocrisy, financial mismanagement, banal preaching, introverted and judgemental congregational life, an aloof and inattentive clergy in 'a Church that does not invite but rejects', and so on. The additional angst loaded onto homosexual, divorced, cohabiting and otherwise 'irregular' Christians will draw readers into an empathic identification with them. Less often, kindly and attentive priests and accepting congregations also find their place.

The life journeys readers are invited to share travel to different destinations: sometimes to a different church or tradition, sometimes to agnosticism or atheism (but never to indifference) and sometimes - surprisingly and less often - to a partial healing of wounds and a determination to tolerate the institutional Church because of their tried and tested love for God. But the tone of the book is not wholly negative; it is not a long whinge about how bad the Church is. Rather, it is a well-planned, comprehensive and sensitive attempt to expose the huge pastoral need that exists within the Church, in the hope that theological, pastoral and organisational change can come about more quickly.

The interviewees all come from Central and Eastern Europe. Although the social and political changes in these countries create a unique situation, the problems of believers with the Church - the editors call these 'irritations' - encountered there are global, and one hopes that the distributors of this remarkable and truth-telling book will be global in their attempts to market it.

Prof. Adrian Thatcher, University of Exeter, U.K.

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We owe hundreds of people gratitude for their help and support in conducting this project and writing this book. We owe the most to those who agreed to open their souls, and to write in an essay or narrate in an interview their personal stories. For most of them, recalling their experiences in the Church, with other believers, the Church hierarchy, or the Church law and discipline was very emotional.

Many thanks go to our colleagues who conducted interviews, translated the texts, and proofread them. Their names and short presentations can be found at the end of this book. The people most directly involved in this project deserve a special place: Stipe Odak, Agnieszka Anna Ukleja, Klara Czar, and Branislav Kuljovsky. All of them were enthusiastically involved in this project from the very beginning.

Special thanks go to Prof. Paul M. Zulehner, Prof. Helen Alford, Prof. András Máté-Tóth, our donators, and Pastorales Forum for their support and their endless patience in helping us to achieve our goals.

And last but not least, we want to thank you dear reader. Your interest in reading these personal stories without judgment shows that you are interested not only in the future and mission of the Church but it also conveys your interest in our fellow humans who feel marginalized or distanced from their religious communities.

Marijo Vukoja

Preface

The book we have in front of us is a collection of interviews and essays on the religious dimension in modern life. In total, 47 persons speak about their personal experiences with or within the Church. These personal stories gathered and printed in the book provide ample material for pastoral theologians, but also for all others who are interested in this topic.

The book is divided in two parts. The first part relates to the difficulties of communication and the relation between believers on the one hand and the relation with the clergy and Church hierarchy on the other. In this part, we can also perceive what the interviewees think about current pastoral practices and behavior of the clergy. In the second part, there are stories of persons who are in an individual conflict with the Church, i.e. those who found themselves confronted with the moral teaching of the Church, Canon Law, discipline or *modus operandi* of the Church officials related to issues of sexuality, marriage, priesthood, and celibacy.

Irritations

Almost all the texts included in this book present a Church that does not invite but rejects. These personal stories are not told by persons who feel attracted to the Church or a Christian community. Therefore, the main focus of these narratives is irritation and not gratification. The list of the revealed irritations is quite long and colorful: It begins with problems in communication between people and goes on to monotonous liturgy and homilies; we find reports about authoritarian behaviors, but also about a deep dissent between interviewees and Church teachings on the family, marriage, sexuality, and celibacy. Some interviewees left the Church of their parents in which they grew up to join a community in which their own desires are better preserved. Others who left the Church find themselves in an area of the universal 'seeking of God'. Thus, the parting from the narrowness of the Church does not bring them to atheism but to spiritual wideness. The presence of personal mysticism and the relationship with the God of all people is obvious. With this God, hell is not compatible.

A Study at the Right Time

The gathered interviews are very helpful for local Churches in societies amidst their transition from communist totalitarianism to democracy.

During the time of communism, the Churches were closed organizations. They defended themselves from the deadly attacks of the atheistic system. The cohesion within the Church was very strong. Criticism was not common, and it was even suppressed. Since the Church lived in the societal underground, the persons who were irritated by the Church lived in a Church underground.

This changed with the Fall of the Berlin Wall. Some believers who felt free in society claimed the same freedom within their Church. However, they were soon disappointed: Churches have urged freedom within society, but not within the Church. Therefore, many members of the Church, who were strongly irritated through circumstances in the common Church life, felt free in society but not in their own Church.

Echoes Network with this project attempts to make hidden or ignored irritations public. It hopes that making them accessible might provoke wide-ranging discussions with the aim to remedy the irritations. In this way, those who are irritated might remain joyful Church members.

Shift from Institution to Person

A common thread running through many interviews is the shift from institution to person. Most interviewees, as well as parents and grandparents of all of them, lived in a time when belonging to the Church was ‘fate’. For them, faith in the Church community was taken for granted. However, for many interviewees, the institutions do not support or bind them anymore. Religion becomes a ‘choice’. The irritations, which destabilize the affiliation, are playing a great role, while, at the same time, attractive gratifications are needed. Those gratifications can be found in other communities or, alternatively, each person can provide them by him/herself.

Such a shift from institution to person concerns all realms of life. An outstanding example is sacrament of Matrimony. In former cultures, but also in the Churches, marriage was highly institutionalized. Today, it is love that plays an important role. Nevertheless, institutions are more stable than persons and their emotions. Therefore, most love stories are subject to change. Similarly, the personal faith of modern people becomes more mobile and therefore unstable.

Spiritual Search

The instability of personal faith is the reason why contemporary people do not remain lifelong members of the Church without having questions and irritations. Some of them find a community of like-minded persons again. However, more and more people rely less on the Church. Instead, they assume the responsibility for their own spirituality and that is what makes them become ‘seekers’. Sometimes, they join others and at other times, they go on their own way, alone.

This has significant impact on the content of their faith in God since one cannot know much about Him. Thus, a religion is replaced by religious universalism. All religions are seen as different paths that lead to the same goal: God, the ‘cosmic Christ’ who is the goal for every human being (Col 1.15-20).

Mirror

Individuals who are going to read interviews presented in this book can use them as mirrors. Reading experiences of others, without rash judgment of them, might help each person to evaluate his or her own experiences. Churches and religious communities can learn from them too. Through reading personal stories in this book, it could be discovered, how in modern culture, some persons who through Baptism become Church members as children, now as adults in religious freedom, search for their own way. Thus, being treated as immature for centuries, members of the Church in our times become adults. This affects the Church language, the way of communication between each other, and decision making. However, the biggest question is to which God the seekers open themselves.

We have to be thankful to the Echoes Network team led by Marijo Vukoja and to all co-operators who conducted and documented these interviews. They have done necessary fundamental work for pastoral theology. However, the biggest gratitude is extended to those who were ready to talk about their own religiosity. This by no means should be taken for granted in times when faith becomes a ‘private affair’.

Paul M. Zulehner

About the Project

The Context

The project entitled *Is there a place for me in the Church?* started as part of a broader research agenda summarized under the title *Echoes from the Church in Central and Eastern Europe*. The general aim was to understand how the contemporary experience of Christian faith ‘resonates’ (echoes) in European countries that experienced, and are still experiencing, a difficult transition from a communist regime to democracy. Unlike their Western counterparts in which transformation of the religious identity took place within the context of increasing cultural pluralization, post-communist countries passed through almost fifty years of anti-democratic political systems, which were closely tied to the anti-religious attitude. The collapse of the totalitarian regimes at the end of the 20th century thus has brought up the question as to how to live and interpret Christian identity in a new context that was suddenly, at least nominally, free and open.

After the fall of communism, religious communities could once again practice their beliefs without fear of persecution. At the same time, the period of political and social transition that ensued has brought many open questions related to the place of religion in the public sphere, the inner dynamic of faith communities, and dialogue between the Church and the rest of society. Since communism was officially a matter of the past, Church communities had to find ways to rearticulate their identities, which comprised both their religious traditions and their belonging to young democracies. This process was by no means easy and free of conflicts. Several texts in this book directly speak about those problems while many of the others can be read as a sub-text of personal narratives.

It is safe to say that religious communities in Central and Eastern Europe are still trying to find their own modes of dealing with the burden of the past, at the same time, more or less successfully handling new cultural, moral, and social challenges. It is important to revive the call for engaged dialogue,

emphatically underlined in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*: “[I]t is the task of the entire People of God [...] to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage.” (GS 44) It is therefore important, in the present situation, to hear views and perspectives from various social groups, especially those who might feel underrepresented.

The Objectives of the Project

Thus, *Is there a place for me in the Church?* was, from its beginning, imagined as a project oriented towards qualitative research that would bring forward hidden, unknown, or ignored personal experiences of Christian believers that are rarely heard and taken into account. The overarching idea was that a better understanding of the difficulties that believers experience in their everyday life could lead to a greater solidarity within the community of the faithful, and more sensitized care from the side of the pastoral workers and religious community leaders.

Aside of the pastoral necessity to hear the unheard voices, by going to the ‘margins’ we have also practiced a certain theological hermeneutics that could be considered as vision statements of two popes of our time. The pope Francis urges us to imitate Jesus in reaching out to those at the margins. In his homily on February 2015 the Pope said: “We will not find the Lord unless we truly accept the marginalized! [...] Truly the Gospel of the marginalized is where our credibility is at stake, where it is found and where it is revealed!”

Not so long ago, the pope John Paul II also asked all of us in his homily for inauguration of his Pontificate not be afraid “[to] open wide the doors for Christ and to serve Christ and with Christ’s power to serve the human person and the whole of mankind. [...] Christ knows ‘what is in man’. He alone knows it. [...] We ask you therefore, we beg you with humility and trust, let Christ speak to man.”

Having these visions of the popes, we hope that, by bringing the testimonials of those who are on the margins of the Church into the light, our readers too might develop a deeper understanding of the central tenets of Christian faith.

The Participants

The project *Is there a place for me in the Church?* was focused towards the persons who were, or still are, members of the Church or a Christian

community, but for various reasons felt distanced or marginalized within Her. In other words, our target group were those individuals who were asking themselves whether there can be a place for them within the community of believers to nourish their spiritual and personal needs without feeling pressured to hide their identity, convictions, or personal situation. Embedding our project into personal stories, we attempted to avoid the abstraction and to bring forward the reality, needs, concerns, as well as dissatisfactions of the concrete believers of our time.

Collection of Interviews

Personal testimonies for our project were collected through written essays and interviews in 12 countries of Central and Eastern Europe: Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine. In total, there are 47 personal testimonies (15 essays and 32 interviews) published in this book.

Since this research was not based on the probabilistic, representative sample, views that are present here cannot be generalized to the broader population. That is to say, it would be impossible to infer the percentage of people in Central and Eastern European societies that agree or disagree with them. Since our project is based on the qualitative approach, the attempt was rather to uncover the complexities of lived faith and to show at least one part of the whole variety of problems that Christian faithful experience. Metaphorically speaking, our aim was not to have percentages and numbers but rather a deeper and more layered understanding of the situations of individuals who see themselves on the ‘margins’ of the Church.

In the first phase of the project, potential participants were invited to write a short essay explaining their personal situation, in line with the general guidelines of the project. The response was generally very low. From several hundred invited participants, 70 initial positive answers were received. However, after 3 months, only 15 of the essays were finally submitted.

There are several possible reasons that might have contributed to this low response rate. First and the most significant reason could have been the mode of collecting testimonies. For many people writing a structured essay about their personal experiences, especially those that involve struggles, fears, and doubts, can be an overwhelming task. This is related not only to the difficulty of the topic itself, but also to their possible estimation that writing an essay might require significant writing competences and a fair amount of time. Secondly, people who felt ‘marginalized’ for some time, might have lost

interest in their Church communities, and did not feel comfortable speaking about faith, spirituality, or religion in general. Thirdly, there could have been a certain hesitance or fear among respondents that narrating their situations would not make any significant changes. On the contrary, they could have felt that such an endeavor would make them even more vulnerable to criticism.

In order to overcome those problems and to achieve our project goals, the second phase of our project moved from written essays to interviews. Due to this change, participants overall showed greater readiness to speak about their experiences in a much more nuanced way.

In order to find potential respondents, the ‘snowball method’ was employed, which means that the project researchers used their personal and professional networks to communicate ‘the call for the interviews’. In response, project coordinators received possible suggestions of people who were interested to partake in the project.

All interviews were conducted in the mother tongue of the interviewees. Since every situation was specific, questions were not pre-defined for all respondents. Instead, interviewers in collaboration with project coordinators developed general guiding themes as interview anchors, and let the conversations flow freely around them. A special attention was paid to ensure anonymity to all our respondents. In line with that, all personal names and other indicators that could be used as identifiers have been changed. In some cases, interviewers also chose to use their pen-names.

All interviews and essays were later translated into English by university students who are familiar with the topic and the local context. The editorial board put a lot of effort to preserve the integral texts as much as possible. However, in order to facilitate reading, some repetitions or parts of the texts that were not relevant for the project topic have been abridged.

How to Read This Publication?

As it was mentioned earlier, this book represents an attempt to put forward testimonies of people who belong to very different social groups, staying faithful as much as possible to their own personalities and ways of presenting ideas. As a result, the texts presented here are considerably heterogeneous in terms of style, but also in respect to theological views they offer, personal emotions they reveal, standpoints they assume, etc.

The texts are divided in two parts. The first part contains testimonies that primarily revolve around various pastoral problems in communication and

collaboration among the members of a Church community. Thus, this part starts with testimonies of lay persons, seekers, agnostics and cultural Christians, who narrate on their doubts about faith, their resentment toward the behaviors of believers and clergy, as well as some liturgical practices they find boring and dysfunctional. Those testimonies are followed by narrations of lay persons, lay employees of the Church, lay theologians and religious persons who are discussing many different topics that concern them. However, the main focus of these testimonies are various structural problems within the Church. The first part ends with two testimonies of two former 'cultural Christians'. Both of them, in different age of their lives and out of different motives, were searching for deeper relation with God and their community. None of them found what they were looking for in their parishes. Instead one got in touch with a charismatic movement and second left the Church of their parents in which he grew up for other Christian community.

The second part of this publication contains testimonies of participants concerning their problems with the Church's teachings, moral, law, and discipline. The first group of these texts in the second part are testimonies of homosexual persons narrating their difficulties when trying to reconcile their faith, their sense of belonging to the Church, the Church teachings on the one part, and their own identity on the other. These texts are followed by testimonies of divorced persons. Some of them are now single, others are in open relationships, and still others are remarried. Some of them are suffering because they are banned from sacraments, others went through what they describe as 'the disagreeable' process of annulment of marriages, others converted to other Christian denominations, and still others distanced themselves from the Church. The last group of texts is related to priests. Here we can read a testimony of a victim of harassment, testimonies of secret relations of priests, and testimonies of former priests. Although the main topics of these testimonies are celibacy and sexual issues of the clergy, interlocutors cover many other issues.

We tried to organize the texts into logical groups. However, the complex nature of the biographical testimonies of our participants makes it impossible to place all of them in clearly demarked categories. In order to assist readers with a thematic overview, keywords and short informative titles have been added to each interview.

We invite our readers to decide for themselves how to read these interviews and essays. For example, readers might decide to read the testimonies from their country of origin first, or to first read the testimonies of persons who are

in the same situation as they are or in a situation similar to that of someone they know. They may start reading from the beginning or from the last story in this book. However, whatever the choice, we would like to invite readers to approach these accounts in a spirit of true amicability, always bearing in mind that they are not scientific articles nor theological treatises, but first and foremost very intimate and personal testimonies.

The ideas, opinions, and arguments published in these testimonies reflect the views of their authors. The Echoes Network solely played the role of the project coordinator, which made the collection and publication of the interviews possible. As a research initiative, the Echoes Network does not endorse any single opinion on issues raised in this book, and we are aware that there are no easy solutions that can be offered. Instead, we would like to invite all readers of this book to reflect upon them. What we would nevertheless like to emphasize is the importance of the hermeneutical encounter, of the readiness to approach the horizons of other people with a necessary degree of sensitivity, and the willingness to question our own positions.

This does not entail, however, that we as a research team see this book as merely ‘just another publication’. Being involved in the project for more than two years, we certainly became personally connected to the stories of all people who participated in it. Besides our academic interests, we could not stay untouched by struggles that people endured. This book is our way to say ‘thank you’ to all of them, by making their voices at least a little louder. Our hope is that the results of this project will serve as a basis for open and continuous dialogue about the present and future situation of the Church in the region of Central and Eastern Europe.

Editor Board

**PART I -
Problems in Communication
with Other Believers, Clergy,
and Hierarchy**

I didn't say that I have not found an answer. I just didn't find an answer in the Church

Moving from Christianity towards the Universal Religion

Interview with Edward, Belarus
Interview Held in Russian by Elvira Goroshko
Translated into English by Viktor Poletko

Key words: universal religion, Protestantism, religion vs. faith, relativism, syncretism, punishment, hell

Could you please say a few words about yourself?

I was born and grew up in Minsk. I grew up in a single-parent family: my mother, brother, and me. My father died when I was a little child. However, this was not the end of our tragedies. My brother had been killed when he was eighteen. Since then, I have lived with my mother. However, I do not like to recall the events of my past life since people tend to take pity on me and I don't like it.

After high school, I studied in a culinary college. Currently, I'm doing an undergraduate degree in linguistics at Minsk State University. Also, I'm a project manager in an IT company.

What kind of child were you?

I was hyperactive. My grades at school were bad. To be honest, I can't stand the Belorussian system of education. For this reason, I didn't submit to the authority of my teachers and my relations with classmates were difficult. Perhaps, my behavior at that time could be explained by the fact that I didn't have my father and, therefore, there was nobody to tell me what to do and how to behave in certain situations. Basically, I was a bully. Especially during

summer break, I always destroyed something or beat somebody. Yet, my mother managed to resolve this. She cultivated love for sports in me. I dreamed of devoting my life to soccer, of becoming a famous player, but after a while, I sustained a leg injury. I went to the hospital; a doctor performed surgery on me and he said that it was successful. Yet, it didn't really work well since I became lame in that leg. They operated on me once again. Therefore, I had to give up my dream of becoming a soccer player, but I could not give up my love for sports. I cycled, and later, I did other athletics.

How did your mother raise you?

My mom gave me total freedom. She didn't say "this is bad" or "this is what you must not do". Freedom of choice – this is how I would describe my life. But in early childhood, she read me a children's Bible instead of fairy tales. And this significantly influenced my future life. Given my mother's permissiveness, I could easily start smoking and consuming alcoholic drinks. Yet, I didn't do this unlike everybody else around me. I remember that once some 'cool guys' forced me to smoke a cigarette, but I refused. Only now do I realize that it was precisely the influence of my mother's faith and the Bible that helped me not to fall down.

My mother was born and grew up in a non-Christian family in the countryside. At the age of seventeen, she moved to the capital of Belorussia to look for a better life. She met Protestants there. It was a very difficult period for her: She was young, inexperienced, and she didn't have an accommodation. Members of this Protestant parish noticed this and helped her. Then, she repented and began to go to church.

Does your mother go to church now?

She definitely believes in God and she prays, but now she is not a regular churchgoer. She attended a Protestant church shortly after she moved to Minsk. I would say that she used to go there quite often for five years in total. Then, she reduced going to church basically because of the parish administration and criticism by fellow parishioners that wounded her. Now, she goes there sometimes, maybe monthly.

Could you please tell me something about your life with God?

My mother brought me to Sunday school immediately after she came to believe in God. I received a certificate for attending it. I had a chance to meet good people there. I'm in touch with some of them even now.

When my mother stopped going to church, I kept going there myself. On Tuesdays, there was a youth service; on Wednesdays, there was general prayer; and on Sundays, I used to spend the whole day in the church. I liked to go to church, to read the Bible, and to attend a theological school. I sang in the choir, preached in the church, and played drums in our musical group. Everybody supported me: my pastor and friends. All of them said that I have to preach the Word of God. I struggled with all of my fears and played music. I was afraid of this because of my young age. I was only seventeen-eighteen years old.

At that time, I attended two Protestant churches: The one in which I sang in the choir and preached, and another one, where I played drums in a musical group. I knew everything about the life of both parishes.

Why did you leave the Church?

Perhaps, it was because I got bored. Every time that I went to church I could foresee the homily, I knew how many songs people would sing, who would preach, and how all of that would end up. It was extremely banal and boring. Preachers would constantly talk about the awakening of the Church, country, and the whole world. However, all of this was too abstract and far from what actually happened.

Once they asked me to preach and I expressed my dissatisfaction before the whole congregation. After that, I was called to the fellowship council. They reprimanded me, criticized my point, and told me that I have to obey the pastor. I didn't agree with this critique but continued to go to church anyway.

Later, however, the rumors and gossip about me started. I'm very sociable and it is easy for me to communicate with the opposite sex. Maybe, for this reason, someone spread gossip that I lead an 'unchristian' way of life in respect to girls. They even offered to pray for me so that I could change my life.

I attended other churches as well. I noticed much less of a degree of conservatism there but I also noticed a kind of competition going on between parishioners. Once you enter a church, they evaluate you on the basis of how you look, with whom did you come, etc. You come not to communicate with your brothers and sisters in Christ but for a show. This really annoyed me. I come to church; look at the people; they try to make an impression that they are true Christians but in reality, they are not. I agree that this cannot be

applied to everybody, but 98% of them are pseudo-Christians.

This made me think about people around me in the church, how they pretend to be good. And this happens in almost all churches. Of course, I will not mention names and details, but I will say that even children of deacons, pastors, and bishops do not live according to the Christian principles in their life. They piously pray, raise their hands, and glorify God but outside the church, they secretly smoke and drink alcohol. Moreover, I heard this from a man who had an affair with a girl from our parish. He himself pointed the finger at her. I saw all this and it annoyed me terribly.

I didn't want to give up immediately. I tried to find answers to all of my questions. In addition, I had many questions regarding the Bible. I addressed these questions to a pastor and deacons but their answers were always the same: "It is a matter of God's will" or "You will not understand it in this life". I think that these are the most stupid answers one could find. Why is it that the Church could not answer these simple questions? No, they give cookie cutter answers. These answers are not satisfactory for someone who really looks for a concrete and clear answer. As a result, people, disappointed with the Church, just leave. These people are not satisfied with the answers like "God's will". That's the most stupid answer. For instance, a child has been raped and they say: "God's will".

How do you view the Biblical quote: "The one who seeks finds"?

I didn't say that I have not found an answer. I just didn't find an answer in the Church. I'm in no way against the Church and temple. A temple is a place where people pray irrelevant of whether they are Buddhists, Muslims, or Christians. It is crucial that by their prayers people create, in a positive aura, a temple. Once I enter a temple, I unwillingly purify myself. I feel relieved.

You offered an example of an Islamic temple. But Muslims worship Allah, not God.

What else I do not like in Christianity is that Christians are strictly convinced that they worship God while non-Christians worship another god. I understand that all believers on Earth pray to one and the same God. I believe that there are many paths to him.

I will give you an example. The one who grew up as a Christian has his own convictions of what is right and what is wrong. But a Muslim also has his convictions that Allah is the true God, whereas Christianity is a delusion. A

Buddhist sincerely believes that his convictions are right. Each of them knows that he or she is right. Once these people meet, each of them will claim that precisely his or her faith is the true one. A Christian will refer to the Bible when defending his views. A Muslim will use the Quran for the same purpose and so on. In fact, all of them are right, but, at the same time, each one will claim that he knows the truth.

Aren't Allah and God different? Love can be proved through actions. Jesus died for all and, therefore, gave us His love: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." But there is nothing like this mentioned about Allah in the Quran?

I can give you several examples to make clear that the Bible contradicts itself and, indeed, God contradicts Himself. For instance, it is stated in the Bible that God loves us more than our parents, that God is love. But a contradiction comes immediately: If you do not lead a righteous life, you will be in hell forever. This is wrong; this is just an intimidation. This is an absence of a free choice. God initially created people with the right of free choice. But it would be inconsistent to deprive human beings of this right shortly after that and then, make the Flood happen since man didn't do what God wanted him to do. It would be strange to give man the freedom of choice and then throw him into hell for leading his life in a way that he likes. But I do not want to say that God is not right.

Allah in Arabic means God. I know something about Islam since I used to work with Muslims. Before I got to know them, I had a very bad impression of them. Later, however, I changed my view. I was nicely surprised that these people are much more sincere and pure than Christians. I found out that they recognize Jesus Christ as a prophet. True, they do not believe He resurrected from the dead, but the fact is that they believe in Him. I asked them: "Who can go to paradise?" It is written in the New Testament that I can only be saved through Jesus Christ, whereas, according to the doctrine of Islam, Christians also can be saved, and not only those who believe in Allah. Thus, Muslims seem to be more tolerant than Christians. For them, it is important to follow the commands of one's conscience: not to offend orphans, respect parents, worship one's god, pray five times a day, and keep fasts. Also, in the Islamic countries, bank loans do not exist. One Islamic couple invited me to Tajikistan to attend their marriage. And I will certainly go there.

Let me disagree with you. People in the times of Noah had a choice. For a hundred years, Noah offered people an opportunity to be saved with him in the Ark, but they refused.

What is the essence of human free will? For instance, you have the freedom to run away or not, but if you don't run away, you will be shot down. Isn't Noah's case the same? Do whatever you wish, but eventually you will be in hell. This is not free will. You are doomed to be in hell if you do not live righteously. And this is what all religions have. I believe that it is not like this.

When I left the Church, when I became disappointed with all of this, when I understood what the real life of a Christian is, and what they accused me of, I started to learn a lot and to communicate with many people. For instance, I was in touch with Buddhists. I went to Thailand to see their monks. I read books about other religions and I came to the conclusion that it is wrong to associate God with any particular religion. God existed before religion, but then people wrote a book, reshaped God in this book, and claimed: "This is God". But in reality, God is outside of any religion.

Consider one more example. A man stands on an ocean shore with an empty glass. He scooped some water into the glass. And then he pretends to have full cognition of the depths of the ocean. Something analogical happens in religion. It keeps people under constraints claiming that God is here and there. You have many commands written in the Bible. These commands are extreme measures of God because people often need to see the explicit commandments like "you shall not kill" or "you shall not steal" in order to follow them. Human beings are stupid. They do not understand what is allowed and what is not allowed until it is written on a tablet. But once you have written them, people will obey. I believe that biblical commandments are embedded within us, although human beings might not understand this. It is not necessary to believe in God in order to see that violence is bad. People just do not think.

Actually, the Quran and the Bible are quite similar. You can read about murders, death, and hell in the Bible as well, and not only in the Quran. For instance, David had 300 wives, yet he was acceptable before God; Solomon had even more wives, and he murdered a lot of people and many of them had been killed without any legitimacy.

For how long were you concerned with the defects of the Church?

It took me around one year. I went to church more rarely and began to fall

asleep during those boring and trivial homilies. I became more and more irritated with the rules and principles of that congregation. For instance, they insisted on praying out loud. Why is this so? People should pray in a way that is the most comfortable for them. But we were simply forced to pray loudly. Or they said that we have to pray for the awakening of the Church. I do not believe in any awakening. There will be no awakening. The Church will talk about awakening till the end of this world, but it will never actually happen. It would be necessary for such an awakening that some kind of virus started to annihilate people, all resources got depleted, and only then could humans reflect seriously about themselves. But our dominant values in this life were always different: how to make money, how to become more attractive, etc.

I'm not against the Church. I rather believe that no man will find the full truth. Neither my words nor yours are fully true. Everyone has one's own truth. The Church must exist, but it is of much importance that people are not killed in the name of God, that nothing is prohibited in the name of God, and that there is always the freedom of choice. And Christians should be more tolerant in respect to other denominations.

I'm often asked: "Are you a Christian?" I say: "No." "Who are you then?" - I'm asked again. And I answer: "I believe in God, who created me and you, and He is not the property of the Church." People have a stereotype and do not understand how it is possible to believe in God and not to belong to any Church?

Have you experienced God's presence personally?

Yes, of course. I was baptized with water, and I was also spiritually baptized. But now I have doubts regarding this. The reason is that in the church, the role of self-suggestion is crucial and very efficient. The experience of meeting God in the church is so actively discussed. Everyone says that you should have this experience so it seems to me that people simply suggest it to themselves. I don't deny that we cannot meet God. What I want to say is that we should be very careful in order not to be just wishful thinkers. People are doing something and ascribe it to the will of God, but after some time, God says: "Who told you to behave like this? I didn't tell you that!"

I haven't been going to church regularly now for about four years but from time-to-time, I may go there because of my good friend. She is a believer and it happens that I go with her for Christmas or the Easter celebration. I sing songs and pray with everyone, and then I leave.

Some time ago, I accompanied another friend, also a believer, on his trip to Norway. I had an opportunity to talk to some guys about the wrongfulness of smoking and drinking alcohol. But I didn't tell them that we should go to church. I accentuated a self-knowledge. I consider it to be the most important thing in life.

Maybe, I would even be a good pastor or deacon, specialized in working with youth, if I was allowed to speak about God and not about the Church. I totally refuse to speak about the Church or to persistently invite others to become its members. Popularity of the Church is measured by the number of churchgoers, as if quantity, and not quality, really matters. This is one more disadvantage - everyone just wants you to become a member of the Church. Don't you see how many bad things were inflicted by the Church throughout the centuries? To mention just a few examples: the Inquisition, witch hunts, when pretty women were tortured and killed, etc. How could the true religion do this? It means that people went the wrong way. They were possessed. They killed scientists and believed that this was what God asked them to do. I cannot close my eyes to that; I face the truth and this truth annoys me.

Sometimes, a preacher presses people during his homily: "If you are not with God, you will not be happy!" However, as a matter of fact, it's not correct. You will be happy because you were born to be happy. If you choose to be with God, you will achieve a harmony in your soul, and as a consequence, you will live your life differently. Your happiness depends solely on you. There are people who do not believe in God but they are happy and have good families. Their happiness does not depend on faith in God. So, no one can limit people and deprive them of their right of choice.

I was frightened in childhood that, if I were to leave the Church, my life would collapse, and for some time, I really believed that this was true. Afterwards, I broke away from it, and I decided for myself that I'm the owner of my life, and I may shape it according to my own wishes. And it worked out; I form my own life. Although I was a bad pupil, I entered university and have a good job now. I alone achieved what I wanted. I develop and improve myself. I'm happy, although outside the Church. I used to live with so many illusions, but I succeeded in dispelling them, and I'm proud of that. Now, it is much easier to live. Now, I even see God in a different way. Moreover, I noticed that believers tend to have more problems and illnesses. If we dig into their lives, we may find the reason for their troubles – it is their hypocrisy.

How about life after death?

I think that hell does not exist. There are two options for sinners: Either they simply return to dust, or there is such a period of time, when their souls are tormented by loneliness and despair in order to be purified. After this purification, everything will be good. I imagine it like this, because if God is Love, He would not torture souls, even of those people who made some mistakes.

We have an option: to choose heaven or hell...

But this is senseless. Imagine that you take your child to kindergarten, that it is full of poisonous snakes and deep abysses. Than you tell him or her: "My child, see, that is the abyss and those are dangerous snakes. You should keep distance from both, otherwise you will die." And you let him stay there. It is very likely that your child will be bitten by a snake or that he will fall into the abyss. Are you going to say to your child, if he or she lost his or her life, that you warned him or her, and that he or she alone is guilty for such doom? This is not right. For God, we are all small beings. Is He going to punish us? I do not think so. People are simply intimidated and that's it. What can we cognize during our earthly life? God? But we cannot even cognize our own selves during such a short time, let alone God.

If you doubt the existence of hell, then you reject the Bible altogether...

The Bible is a good book, but it does not mean that it is a true book. Why should it be true? Who is able to answer this question? I can write any book and say: "This is the truth." There should be independent evidence. Even the murderer will justify himself. The Bible justifies itself and the Quran does the same.

I believe in life after death; however, paradise will look different from what we are told it looks like. We are told that in paradise we will glorify God and that's all. Nevertheless, I do not say that I'm right.

A Programmer Speaks About what He Sees behind the Visual Appearance of the Church

Interview with Desko, Serbia
Interview Held in Serbian and Translated into English
by Ivan Ušumović

Key words: 'active' youths, liturgy reform, 'zombie activities', the Church as financial institution, the Church as community, preaching, priest as elders, science and religion, theory of evolution, celibacy

Could you please say something about yourself; how did you grow up, and what did the Church mean to you?

Ever since I can remember, I went to church with my mother and brother. I was an altar boy until 18. I think that I was a good boy. In elementary school and in high school, I was a good student. I attended religious classes on a regular basis and received all the sacraments.

During high school, I missed some Masses here and there. However, when I got married, I stopped going to church because somehow I didn't have the need to attend Mass anymore.

When you were growing up, was there a priest or a nun who made an impact on you and your faith?

Priests and nuns influenced me because at that time I still didn't form my own opinion. They opened my mind. However, in my adolescent period, I gained an interest in various themes about faith, so their influence became minimal. I rarely attended catechesis for youth because the themes discussed there were really boring for me.

Did you participate in any performances that were organized in

your parish or were you a shy boy?

As a child, I participated in Christmas recitals and plays. I played the role of a shepherd once or twice. I participated in recitals for Mother's Day too, and I was singing in the choir. I also attended youth meetings. But I didn't stand out; I didn't play any instruments. I wasn't a leader; I was just a participant.

The behavior of leaders was very strange to me. They gave me the impression that those roles were their only meaning in life. For me, it seemed like it was just a kind of psychosis. It is good to be involved in something and work for it, but not at that level. That behavior repelled me from going there. It became disgusting just to watch them as they were reaching some kind of ecstasy.

Was it their behavior or the imposing of opinions that deterred you from attending those meetings?

Well, for me personally, their opinion was funny and they could not impose it on me; they could only repel me.

Generally speaking, each individual should be a member of a certain community because we are social beings. Especially young disoriented adolescents should be in some groups. But these groups should not impose any opinion on them. Adolescents are in the phase of forming themselves, and if someone is limiting them with some silly rules or opinions, they are automatically rebelling. They cannot express themselves because someone is constantly imposing something on them. If the Church continues acting in that way, the outcome won't be good at all. Adolescents must find themselves, and the Church should be there to put some signs on their path, but not to walk their road for them. Everyone is a tailor of their own personal faith.

In a way, are you saying that imposing some kind of rules and opinions by 'active' adolescents or 'leaders' is a way to repel others?

Yes, their stances are in accordance with the Church. I can't say that they aren't. But they were too exposed and their behavior and words didn't correlate with my inner feelings.

The biggest problem was that they, in my opinion, acted as if their brains were brainwashed and programmed. They didn't represent their own opinions but impersonated their leaders. Those 'active' adolescents did not abide by

their own preaching and rules they tried to impose. As time passed, it became clear how ‘committed’ they were to the faith and the religious way of life.

What is the main problem of the Church in your opinion?

The main problem of the Church today is that the Church herself is very conservative and closed. It doesn’t mean that she has to be liberalized. The truth that existed over thousand years is a truth now too. The truth itself does not change. However, the methodology of explaining that truth has to follow the contemporary man.

Today, a man doesn’t want to listen to the same stories in church every year. The only thing that is different is the 10 minute sermon in which the priest tries to explain the main essence of the readings or he just reads the text, which he had downloaded from the internet. Everything else is repeated.

When people go to church they know exactly what to expect. Churchgoers are literally acting like zombies – they know when they have to sit, when to stand... Maybe some people need it like a kind of mantra that has a calming effect on them. Nevertheless, the Church should reduce all those ‘zombie rituals’.

When a person reads the Bible day by day, he can read the same sentence and have completely different thoughts about that sentence every time. Explaining those words and interpreting the Gospel from different points of view is what we need today.

I have a feeling that everything is explained in a very simplistic way. A person that reads the Bible in his spare time, and thinks about the Bible, or has any kind of experience with reading the Bible could understand what I am talking about. For example, main things that are repeated over and over in too much of a simplistic way are that we have to be good, that we should pray a lot, to respect other people, etc. All of that is nice, but I can put that in three sentences and not sit there for an hour. I want to hear something I don’t know, something new that I haven’t pondered before. That is the main reason why I hesitate to go to church.

If I spent one hour in church, I would get only one minute of something interesting and good! Common knowledge that easily can be found on the internet should not be repeated in church. The priest should go deeper in unravelling the things we can’t discover by ourselves. Today, on the internet, I can find 50,000 different explanations of one sentence. Some of those explanations I haven’t seen yet. Those unknown explanations are what I am

talking about.

Maybe older generations and those who go to church every day do not need it and they would not understand what I am talking about. But they have already understood and accepted what they needed to know. Young people are those who should hear something new. They are bored. They need the essence. Today, everything is about information, and if information is repeated endlessly, nobody needs it anymore. That is the problem.

What disappointed you the most in the Church?

The thing that disappointed me the most was that the Church says one thing, does the other, and thinks a third thing. The Church has become a financial institution where everything is led by money. That is good for some companies where the profit is the only goal. But the Church is not registered as a company. Wherever the money is involved, there is only one goal and that is profit. If that is all that matters to the Church, She should become a company and all of us should become employees.

The essence is lost. People are trying to approach God. If they cannot do it alone they need Community, i.e. the Church. In this Community people should talk to each other, debate, and exchange their opinions. We are missing what existed in the first Church communities. For the first Christians, the buildings themselves were not important because they gathered in private houses; they ate, discussed, and debated together. Apostles and elders were in charge of those communities. They guided the communities and ensured their functioning and survival. This is important since each group has to have a leader.

Everyone should have the possibility to talk in church. For example, if I dislike what the priest is preaching, I want to have the possibility to stop him and discuss with him. If I'm wrong, some other person will come into the discussion with us. The essence of such discussions should not be to show who is cleverer but to make the community stronger.

There are two ways for a human to develop themselves: One is to humiliate everybody and make him or her greater in the eyes of others, and the other way is to help all around him or her to become greater and in that way, the person would become greater too. The latter approach is what we are missing in the present day Church.

In church, everybody stares at the priest as if he were God himself. But he is not God. The priest is not impeccable. He is not a perfect being. People

stare at him, and they can't think consciously. But if they found out that the priest made some mistake then the whole community becomes shocked. Such incidents create a negative effect on the whole community.

Every community must have a leader. A woman can be a leader too. A community should have the possibility to choose its own leader. The leader should be a family person, the head of a household, and a person who has knowledge and experience in upbringing children, just as it was in the first communities. However, if he or she commits some kind of offence, it should be presented to the community and a new leader should be appointed. That is the only method in which the Church can survive.

The elders should bring Jesus close to us, but they themselves are humans too! When I was an acolyte, I was very irritated when bishops would arrive at our parish. Even the priests were bowing down to the bishop and kissed his hand, kissed him on his head, kissed whatever bishops there were, as if God himself had landed on Earth. It was even worse if some cardinals were to arrive.

I am aware that the bishop is the boss for those priests. Therefore, they behave exactly the same way as employees of any other business would behave: They flatter their boss. That is wrong because the bishop is only an elder - a leader. We should respect him. But why should I bow to him when he is passing by? He is a human like anyone else. For me, he is neither a kind of goodness nor a representative of goodness.

Is that behavior of priests what repelled you from the institutional Church?

The Church as an institution, in my opinion, is very bad. She should not exist in this form. The Church should be a community of believers who come together to celebrate the Eucharist and to talk about God. Nothing more! Everything else is unnecessary. Everything more than that serves only, in my opinion, for gaining a profit. I do not see any other reason why the Church is globalized. The Church is the first global institution and globalization only leads to the easier control of humans and easier earnings of profit.

Do you still believe in God in the same way as before?

I don't believe in God in the same way as I did before. Now, my faith is different. It is more serious. I'm a programmer and by default, I am always looking for what is behind a visual appearance that is presented to us. Today,

there are many TV programs and popular scientific documentaries in which, through various scientific theories, not explicitly, God is being excluded. We have theories and therefore, it seems that we do not need God anymore. It seems that today we know how all things have been made. Today, it is even possible to make synthetic cells that can be programmed to multiply and to do various things. Therefore, we might ask for what reason do we need God when we can do all by ourselves.

I would like to illustrate it as programmer and designer of systems. In programming, there is a concept known as object oriented programming. Let's imagine that I am, as a programmer God and that I want to create the most perfect being on Earth, i.e. a man.

In object oriented programming, everything is based on classes. We always start from basic classes, from basic objects to more complex ones. That means that an object inherits all features from the previous object or class. For example, when you start programming something new, the first step is to find the basic objects you can use and upgrade them to more complex ones, and every successive more-complex class inherits most of the features from the previous complex class.

Let's say that the simplest organism is bacterium. That means that a bacterium is the basic class out of which a worm might be created. The worm would inherit many features of bacterium and it will have some of its own features as well. Out of a worm, an invertebrate might be created. Again, an invertebrate would inherit all codes that are used for the creation of a worm. However, the invertebrate would have some new codes as well. Then, there would be more complex organisms like vertebrate, mammals, and at the end, there is a man.

It doesn't mean that through evolution man came into existence out of a bacterium. Such a claim, religious or not, would be irrational and absurd. For example, human beings share 77% of their genetic code with bananas. It doesn't mean that a banana is our relative, but that in the process of creation, the more complex beings are created by the use of the basic objects or less complex objects.

However, science as such is not creating anything, but only revealing what already exists. Therefore, science cannot be in conflict with religion. The task of science is not to prove whether God exists or not but to find out and to explain how everything works. All our knowledge and theories are based, I think, on less than 1% of the whole universe that we could see while more

than 99% of the universe is completely unknown to us. On the other hand, the verses of the Bible cannot be read and understood literally either.

In my opinion, believing in God is not anymore linked to the Church. Before, I was convinced that if you believe in God, you must go to church. Now, I'm absolutely convinced that it is not necessary. Some people need it in order to strengthen their faith. I do not need it. I can rarely hear something in church that can profoundly deepen my faith. Since there is nothing new to 'gain', I do not 'invest' my time in going to church.

A lot of people believe in something. That is wrong. God isn't something. He is someone. My faith in God is not threatened although I am not going to church. A lot of times, before, in my youth, I had some doubts, but now I realized that all of my knowledge is based on logic so that's why I believe in God.

Are you leaving space in your heart to regain trust in the Church?

Yes, but it will happen only if She changes Her mentality, attitude toward believers and Her philosophy of functioning. The Church should go back to Her origins and the priests should be elected elders with formal theological education. However, I do not believe that it would happen soon because it is not the interest of the clergymen.

The Church should not be a global institution; She should act locally. The role of the pope as the 'first among equals' is okay, but not in such a way that he makes all of the decisions by himself. The believers should participate in the Church's life more actively. It is not enough to invite them to decorate a church before Christmas. Actually, that is nothing. They should be invited to preach.

Sometimes, I thought to interrupt our parish priest while he was preaching nonsense. But if I would have done it, I think that I would be thrown outside the church. Community communication is the most important aspect in the Church. People in communities should communicate and exchange their opinions and the communities themselves should also do the same with other communities. At the moment, it is only priests who communicate with other priests.

Another important issue is priestly celibacy. Although celibacy is generally a good thing, also practiced in some other religions and by some areligious people, it should be optional – not an obligation. If a priest would like to devote himself only to God and not to be troubled by having a family, then

celibacy should be his own choice. However, in my opinion, celibacy is a problem if it is imposed on people that are not ready to accept it, but they have to do it simply because of their vocation. They will always have a problem with their sexuality. This is why there are many cases of sexual abuse involving clerics.

If a man wants to get married then he should be allowed to do so. A married priest could have more knowledge of how to help the community members with their family and marital problems. It is a bit hypocritical that the unmarried priests, who do not have their own families, advise their parishioners in how they should live.

In your opinion, what should the Church change in Her organization? You have already mentioned some changes but now you can be more concrete.

Probably nothing what I have mentioned before will happen. It would be far more realistic to expect changes in liturgy. There should be more time provided, at least 50% of Mass time, for debates about the Bible. Those written words are the only thing that we believers have. There are no angels that would come down to preach to us. Therefore, debates and critical opinions, that could be done right now by some decree or something like that, might be helpful. The priests could read the Gospel and give guidelines. Then, everyone who is willing should have the opportunity to join the debate. In that way, the Word could be observed from different points of view like never before.

We are not all the same; some of us might have higher expectations while others are more passive. Nevertheless, everybody has a different view. That's why we must go into a deep reading. That actually would be a quite plausible change. After Mass, some tasks can be given to various people so that they would be easily prepared for the next Mass and for the next debate. In that way, we won't look like zombies. That's how the Church would attract more people to take part in the life of the Church.

Now, when people go out of the church after the Mass, they start talking about irrelevant things that don't mean anything. We should change that. Giving them the opportunity to be active during the Mass would allow them to get to the substance.

Another important issue to be considered is the Church's financing policy. I am aware that there are many costs. Nevertheless, those who choose to

become priests and leaders of the community should take a vow of poverty. It doesn't mean that they should starve. However, those who live in humility can approach those who have a lot, as well as the poor. The man who does not live humbly can't understand the man who has nothing or very little. The problem is not the possession of material goods as such but the behavior, interests, and goals that possession brings. It happens that people from poor families are forcing their children to become priests so that they would become rich. That kind of a priest just becomes rotten, and that way to the priesthood loses its essence.

I would love to see some changes. I would also love to participate in Mass, but not in this way and in this layout.

Am I still in front of this border, or have I passed it already?

Reflections of a Seeker

Interview with Peter, Slovakia
Interview Held in Slovak by Martin Mihalik
Translated into English by Branislav Kuljovsky

Key words: life crises, eastern religions, Mahayana Buddhism, Apostolic Church, Abd-ru-shin, anthroposophy, Páleš, Jehovah's Witnesses, reincarnation, the Church and science

Do you think that there is a place for you in the Church?

I'm not sure whether I'm competent to answer this question. The first thoughts that came to my mind are actually questions: Where am I actually? Am I just someone on the outskirts of the Church or am I completely outside the Church? And what does 'the outskirt of the Church' actually mean? What defines the separating line between 'being on the outskirts of the Church' and 'being outside the Church'? Am I still in front of this border, or have I passed it already?

Do you have any grounding in some Church or religious tradition?

I have received only the sacrament of Baptism in the Catholic Church. I would characterize my family as 'areligious' because the question of religion has never been addressed there. I don't know why my parents had baptized me since my father was attracted to the communist ideology. I have received no religiosity from my family, maybe, a latent potential for a generally antireligious attitude.

I never lived religiously. At puberty, I would have characterized myself as very defiant, an antireligious type of person. I was skeptical, critical, and taunting everyone who claimed to be religious. The main targets of my

provocations were those classmates whose faith was traditional, those who didn't know why they were attending religious classes, and those who went there because of their parents.

In the context of childhood, do you remember any explicitly bad experiences with the Church, or any negative memories in relation to religion?

During adolescence, I shared the prejudiced view about the Church, which mixed the Church with the Middle Ages and obscurantism. It was a general view obtained probably through the media, or perhaps through school. Since I come from the Trnava region, I have heard stories about Ján Sokol and other things, but I was not able to assess what was really true in them.

The first concrete experience happened only during military service when I started to turn to religion in a more positive way. I allowed the question of whether religion has anything meaningful to say to enter into my searching. So, I started to genuinely search. During that time, in a certain critical period of my life, I had the desire to see a priest and to go to Confession although I didn't really know what Confession consisted of.

Nevertheless, in a certain life crisis, out of an inner need to talk with someone who understands spiritual matters, I decided to look for a priest. When I, shaky and uncomfortable, came to the confessional, the priest told me that I was at the wrong address. Since I haven't received the necessary sacraments, he sent me somewhere else saying that I first need to receive the sacraments and only then can I come for Confession. This experience was more or less negative because I expected understanding and acceptance. You struggle with something in your life but because you don't have something, which I perceived then as formalities, the priest cannot talk to you at all. So this is an experience that could be characterized as negative.

During your upbringing, you didn't feel attracted to any Church or Christianity, but then, at a certain point in your life, during military service, you started to feel something that attracted you and you wanted to open the door that had been closed until then. Have you ever thought about what it was and why it happened there?

Sure. It was my life crisis after high school. At the time, I didn't know what to do next with my life. This crisis resulted from a kind of pubertal idealism. It was approximately when I was around eighteen-nineteen years old. It was

for the first time that a certain internal deepening, a certain shock, occurred in my life, and out of such hopelessness the following questions arose: What is this life about? What does one have to do? What is the point of it all? And with these questions also came the first contacts with something that I would today call spirituality. They came through the eastern teachings and specifically through Tibetan Buddhism. Suddenly, a new gate opened before me and I found out that religion doesn't have to be so stupid.

Your first opening to spirituality came through Eastern religions, particularly Tibetan Buddhism. Is it there that a new spiritual dimension opened in you or the world around you?

Yes, there I felt it. In Mahayana Buddhism, morality and virtue have a great role. Everywhere, it speaks about working on one's self and improving the world, wishing good to all living beings. This was very appealing to me. Similarly, the question about the relationship between various religions themselves arose. So I went to the library and borrowed books like *Yoga and Christianity* and similar ones. I tried to uncover what denominators, common and different, can be found in these religions.

And later, did you start looking for a community and other people who had greater knowledge about this issue?

Yes, but since it was such a specific Tibetan school, which was poorly present in Czechoslovakia, the contacts were hard to find. One of my best friends began to share a similar worldview in about a year. We read books and sometimes, when we knew that there would be a lecture in the city, we went. For example, we went to a lecture about the Diamond Way of Buddhism.

It was more about looking for and participating in events than being anchored in a community. Then, there was a long period when I started visiting different communities including Christian ones, more precisely Protestant communities like the Apostolic Church. I also visited various other communities, exploring which one is more authentic and where it suits me internally. But at that time, I would still characterize my spiritual life as solitary and much anchored in private reading and experiencing spirituality through books or in solitude.

You said that after meeting with Buddhism, you started looking for various groups within the Buddhist philosophy. Why did you then look up Christian communities also? And why the Apostolic Church?

I was interested in the question of comparison and mutual correlation between these religions. Jesus is obviously recognized in Eastern thought, but only as a prophet. He is a yogi master who achieved something, and there are many people like that in the Eastern tradition. I perceived the figure of Jesus in Buddhism in the same way. But this peculiarity with Christianity came later.

At a certain point, I happened to come across the magazine *Sofia*, a quasi-esoteric magazine from the nineties. It contained esotericism, Christian heresies, and various other things. In one issue of this magazine, there was an article about movements like Abd-ru-shin's. Those movements are certainly not categorized among the traditional Churches; however, their entire spirituality is interpreted through Christian language and they emphasize the person of Jesus Christ. I read Abd-ru-shin's book *In the Light of Truth: The Grail Message*.

At the same time, there were other Christian heretical currents through which I came closer to the terminology as well as the essence of Christianity. One of those, also mentioned in the magazine, and about which I subsequently read tons of literature, was anthroposophy. I encountered Páles' Angelology there for the first time as well.

Besides, I had friends among Jehovah's Witnesses, and so, I was a little interested in that as well. But soon, I felt that I didn't want to go further in that direction because it was not close enough to me to develop my spirituality.

Is it during that time that you identified yourself with Christianity?

Not yet completely although it was the period closely connected with one experience, which also happened during a certain crisis period. I interpret the nature of that experience with caution and in the past, I didn't even refer to it. The reason is that, for example, already one year from that experience, every recollection of it was still very intense and automatically made me come close to God's presence. Only later did it fade and the experience is no longer a source of inner spiritual reinforcements for me.

I would characterize that experience very carefully as a feeling of God's presence, and for me personally, it was an encounter with Christ. But I say this very carefully because who can tell this about him or herself? There are strategies of spiritual powers to deceive humans. These issues are very delicate and sensitive, but it is probably since then that my spirituality acquired a

Christian dimension and in some aspect made me a Christian.

When did this event happen and what did Christianity mean for you at that time?

At that time, I was nineteen. I realized that there are different paths to God – Buddhism, Christianity, etc. Therefore, I asked myself why I should make myself a Buddhist when I live in a culture that, for some reason, has the Christian tradition. If Buddhists are right, Christianity leads to God as well. So it seemed to me reasonable to consider the Christian spirituality. It is hard to say what my picture of Christianity was at that time because that is when I really became open and started examining and seriously undermining my adolescent idea of Christianity. I was searching in various communities and examined what those communities say, whether there is a little something of what I myself experienced. And so my picture of Christianity at that time was not particularly strong. I simply became an enquiring person.

So you were a tabula rasa vis-à-vis Christianity, searching, absorbing, and trying to learn more.

Yes, and I was very careful. This caution stemmed from the fact that there are different denominations of Christianity, and they hold different opinions towards each other. Now, it was hard to discover Christianity because one really didn't know where to look. There are many confessions everywhere, many groups, communities, and each has a slightly different view. Therefore, even if people really want to accept Christianity, they cannot because they don't know where to find it.

What was your next step? Anthroposophy? Angelology?

No, these preceded that experience. I have become familiar with these currents through the magazine *Sofia*. At that time, I would characterize myself as particularly unfocused, open, and searching. Then the experience came. Afterwards, I started to sort things out, compare, and create my own view. Abd-ru-shin went more into the background.

A friend of mine is still anchored in Buddhism. According to him, I have become a strong Christian bigot. However, I have kept some questions from the Eastern worldview; they are close to me and that is also why the variety of Christian denominations has narrowed down for me. For example, I still have not abandoned the question of reincarnation. When I read sophisticated, very logical treatises and arguments between the various camps over this issue,

reincarnation made the world partially more meaningful. The streams like Abd-ru-shin, anthroposophy, and angelology include reincarnation. That is why with time they have become more acceptable. I have not completely left anthroposophy yet. It offers me some compromise or merger between the East and the Christian West. I don't find that in traditional Churches.

How would you characterize anthroposophy? Is it a religion or a philosophy?

That is a problem. It is rather a religion. I would characterize it as a Christian religion because the heart of it is Christ. He is not seen as a messiah, but as a teacher, and at the same time, He was something in history – to put it in anthroposophic terms – he was something central in the evolution of the Cosmos. The event on Golgotha is there as well. It is from this point of view that anthroposophy is Christian. And at the same time, it also comprises those Eastern elements while also refusing some of them. It is from anthroposophy that a certain 'Christian community', which is regarded in Germany as one of the new evangelical churches, has emerged.

However, paradoxically, anthroposophy itself never wanted to be a religion in the classical sense of the word although it possesses many aspects of religion. It talks about spiritual worlds, angels, God... The reason is that its vision is to bridge the gap between science and religion. Its authors themselves call anthroposophy a spiritual science.

The meeting with the Catholic Church came after this?

Well, I studied at a Catholic university. It was not my intention to study there. During my studies, I didn't feel so much of a Catholic influence. However, I met there, again through books, with one Christian philosopher who made a great impression on me. I started looking for more information about him. I found that there is one fellowship, which is named after him and I applied there. And there, I met a community of people who had much higher demands for knowledge. I started going to their meetings and in many ways, I was impressed. My experience with this community led me to some internal dilemma, which I didn't have in the Apostolic Church or with Abd-ru-shin. I started to look for what is identical and what is contradictory between these currents. Where are these currents complementary and where can they not coincide?

The Catholic community didn't require you to choose between these currents?

Well, this community doesn't have such a clause in its statutes; at least I'm not aware of it. However, I didn't hide what, at the time, were my own convictions. From the beginning, I spoke openly about angelology and other things. Only a few noticed it because I knew how to adapt.

When someone had a favorite author, I read about him or her and then talked to the person in 'his or her language', and thus, he or she didn't even notice that I'm a bit 'out of this world'.

Only a few people knew my background. Usually, there was no time left to talk about my own convictions. But I guess there are individuals in that community who think a person cannot be simultaneously on both sides. I'm also more and more convinced that you cannot hold both views – Christian and anthroposophic – together, because, for example, anthroposophy is different in its understanding of the Middle Ages. For anthroposophy, it is not the Dark Ages as it is for Christianity. Anthroposophy doesn't deny its historicity. Thomas Aquinas and many others are human beings par excellence according to anthroposophy. Anthroposophy recognizes that many of the Catholic Church's dogmas are true; however, the anthroposophic approach to those issues is a bit different. Anthroposophy views the world as spiritually developing and attributes some meaning even to pre-Christian religions. And what was in the Middle Ages still has its validity for anthroposophy. In many doctrinal matters, anthroposophy is in agreement with Catholicism. Not in all, of course, and in some points anthroposophy is definitely heretical.

Is this your current path, where on the one side, there is the Catholic orthodox doctrine and on the other side, there is anthroposophy?

I think so. It is a long-term process. Before, I was searching more broadly. I was really interested in many things. I even visited one Muslim country just because I was very interested in its culture and religion. In addition, I wanted to understand what, why, and how Christianity differs from Islam, and why there are all of these historical conflicts.

Now, I don't have time to deal with everything and therefore I address these issues of mine in the Catholic environment. Due to being part of that Catholic community, the circles of people that I see have become limited. A lot of people around me are Catholics and from that it follows that I'm dealing with questions that are more Christian in character.

What is your position today? Do you consider yourself a Christian since you don't consider yourself an orthodox Catholic?

Yes, definitely... Even though, there is a problem. When I say "Yes, I'm a Christian," I say this with a certain humility. Those criteria for who is and who is not a Christian are given and I don't completely fulfill them. I like to add the fact that "yes, I'm a Christian, but reincarnation..." I don't have the need to tell everybody that I'm a Christian, but when someone asks the question, I admit it. I say that it is less difficult for me to internally accept Christianity. The bigger problem is to acknowledge me as a Christian.

What do you find unacceptable in Catholic orthodoxy? What are those unacceptable things, from the doctrinal and moral point of view, and also from the everyday ordinary life of Christians?

For example, the issue of pedophilia. I wonder whether it is caused by an inherent consequence of certain accents on particular elements in various confessions which then create these side-effects, or is it something that is only present in the popular media image and is not anchored in reality and only the media creates it. But on this point, I will probably be in agreement with an orthodox Catholic because he or she also condemns pedophilia. However, sometimes I have the impression that many Christians very easily accept that it is just a media phenomenon and they don't take it seriously enough.

Another thing, in that Christian community of lay people, which I was part of, there was a kind of admiration of clerics, probably due to the fact that members of that community were young. I have never felt sympathy with those 'official representatives' who chose a priestly career. I have the impression that lay people and their shepherds are two separate worlds. I say this with caution because I just know one side and not the other. I know it only through the media. The picture I have about the official Christian-Catholic world of clergy is not nice.

With regards to morality, there are many positive attitudes that I like about Catholics. Whether they are successful in it or not, they at least officially profess the need to be a good person, to develop in terms of leading a virtuous life. They acknowledge traditional values. This is still something that is appealing to me.

I'm not able to assess the details such as celibacy. It is perhaps connected with the first problematic issue. I'm a little more liberal in this. I think that the fact that the priestly vocation was exclusively for men had some historical

justification; however, I have the impression that now it is no longer necessary. I say this with caution too because I don't know the spiritual reasons that were behind these decisions, but still, I don't think that these are the key issues. Even if the Church, now, approved the ordination of women and the abolition of celibacy, I would not change my attitude towards the Catholic Church. However, if I founded the Catholic Church now, I would not require celibacy or the exclusive ordination of men.

Other problematic questions are doctrinal. Well, not directly doctrinal, but rather the questions concerning the relationship between faith and science. This issue is so complex that it cannot be explained in simple terms. I think that the Catholic Church is somehow historically forced to cope with the scientific revolution and with all that comes from the Renaissance. And there are different reactions to it, starting with the encyclical of Pius X, if I'm not mistaken, and the critique of modernism, to the Second Vatican Council. These two are trying to give answers to something, but in my opinion, without success.

And there is one more thing. The main point for me is the question of reincarnation. It is a very delicate question for me and again, just like with celibacy and other decisions of the Catholic Church, I think that there were historical reasons for its exclusion. It just was not part of the doctrinal teaching. And today, in a sense, I understand that for the Catholic Church, this is a question that is beyond orthodoxy; the Church could not actually start teaching it even if She found out that reincarnation was a true view about the world. How would they then deal with their own history? And the second key point for me is the question concerning science.

So the problem you have with Catholic orthodoxy is the way the Church deals with science, progress, and modernism? It seems to you that the Church has not sufficiently coped with science?

I would put it like this. There were times when humans themselves could explore what later became the subject of revelation or mythology. Humans could tell more about the world than science now knows or a person normally knows when having sensual experience and thinking with his or her brain. Sometimes, people just had spirituality as an experience and in addition to the material world, they perceived something like the spiritual world. This was reflected in mythologies and ancient nations and it was preserved in a distorted way. However, it was not the result of naivety or fear, or awe of lightning; it meant that they really perceived something.

Over time, this perception has been lost and the Catholic Church regained this information about the world from the best mediator there could be. Again, there was someone who was able to break the cognitive barrier in which we are trapped. Today, we can only believe that it is true. I think that this is historical and that once again, up until a certain point, this was the right answer. Yes, human beings themselves could not know anything about it; they could not have similar visions as those proclaimed by the prophets, Jesus Christ himself, the apostles, the revelation of John, and so on. Humans could not have it by themselves; they had to accept it through faith, which the Catholic Church carries in its tradition.

However, this period has passed; it had its historical significance but it elapsed. Today, again, it is possible to have contact with the spiritual world, with which we had contact at the beginning of our era, and about which Jesus Christ talked as well. However, He used language that was adequate for that time because there was neither science nor modern rationality.

In my opinion, if Jesus Christ would come now, he would speak another language, a language that would be appealing to the most intelligent men of the time if they were open to it. For now, I have the feeling that the question is formulated in such a way that one must deny some of his or her dignity. In my view, a Catholic cannot be internally at peace with what science says. He or she can invent all sorts of theories, of the Bill Carroll type talking about how creation doesn't exist, about the existence of things, about how things work, but internally, there will still be something unsettling.

In the end, can you say one or two things that impress you most about the Catholic Church or Christianity?

Dostoevsky once said: "When there is no God, everything is permitted." We think that a bad life was associated with the past, but Christianity points out that it is not so. When you reject this life and faith in God, the only thing you are left with is: "everything is permitted".

Christian leaders represent in some sense a good 'lifted finger' because they call our attention to the true consequences of things. When a person is indeed an atheist, what grounds can he or she provide us with to tell us that we should behave well and that I should not hurt him or her? What will his morality look like if there is no God? Actually, the lifted finger rightly points to the interconnection between moral life and some doctrinal opinion. In other words, only if God exists will it make sense to act morally.

There is a second thing. It is like a little bit of classical music and Jazz for me. I don't listen to Jazz too much and I don't understand classical music much as well, but I feel that there are some treasures hidden in there. I will not condemn them just because I have not developed a taste for them. And it is the same with the sacraments. I don't live a sacramental life, but I feel that there, the Catholic Church bears something that has its treasures. In the same way as with music, one must refine his or her perception, which is not always easy. I have been trying to enjoy classical music for a long time now and it goes very slowly. It is the same with the sacraments, namely, that the sacramental life is still something to envy.

A big miracle is needed to make a believer out of me

An Agnostic Speaks about His Difficulties in Comprehending Faith and God

Interview with Pavle, Serbia
Interview Held in Serbian and Translated into English
by Ivan Ušumović

Key words: agnostic, searcher, war in ex-Yugoslavia, criticism of institutional Church

Could you please tell me something about yourself, about your childhood, growing up, and your time at school?

Considering the situation in the state at that time, I believe that I grew up in an idyllic family environment. There were neither ‘turbulences’ nor dramas in my family. Everything was fine. I would say that I had just a normal preschool time. I was a decent, good child, or at least, I think so. Maybe, I was sometimes a bit too energetic like all children at that age are.

My elementary school started approximately the same time as those crazy times in our state began. It was the wartime and it was not easy to bring children up in that environment. We all changed a bit. The children were too grown up for their age. When we were 7 and 8, we were discussing topics that were not suitable for our age. We, children, started to divide ourselves between Serbs and Croats even though I had no idea what that meant. Nobody in my family talked about those issues with me.

I remember that we had a snowball fight in the first grade. When we were forming teams, we split ourselves into two groups: Serbs and Croats. Almost all the boys wanted to be Serbs and on the other team, there were ‘Croats’, i.e. girls and one boy, whose name was Franjo. He was in a group of Croats because his name was obviously a Croatian name. Under the influence of state

media, we, boys, pretended to be Serbs because Serbs were strong, powerful, and the whole world was against them.

Nevertheless, during this period, there were many abnormal themes that we were ‘discussing’ between ourselves. I think that the state media manipulated us along with the unhealthy upbringing in families during the wartime; these are the sources of many problems that some of my colleagues have in their lives now.

When we were in 4th or 5th grade of elementary school and when some kind of self-awareness self-conscience was forming in us, without influence of grown-ups, somehow, I became aware of my surroundings. I was aware that not all things are black and white. Even though we were too young for such topics, some of my friends and I realized that all of those things that were happening in our state and region were not normal. We concluded that the state and grown-ups were more childish than we were.

In high school, I was occupied with other topics like religion, God, justice, injustice...

Was there anyone who was giving you direction concerning these topics?

I would say that there were three periods in my childhood. The first period would be one when I became aware of my existence – when I was three or four years old. My grandmother took me to church very often. She was a very pious person. However, although she talked to me a lot about the Church and faith, I was too young to form any opinion about them. I went to church out of curiosity, like I wanted to go anywhere.

The second period of my upbringing was characterized by war. I spent more time with my parents. At that time, they had basic existential worries like how to survive in those times of crisis. So, even though my parents were religious, they didn’t talk with me about faith or the Church. I received the sacrament of Baptism. However, they let me form my own opinions about the Church. I had the possibility of attending catechism classes, but I preferred sports instead.

The third period was my early adolescent stage, when I was thirteen or fourteen years old. In this period, I formed my definite opinion about the Church as an institution, and about religion and God.

How do you reconcile the fact that you received the sacrament of

Baptism but you declare yourself to be an atheist?

Yes, it is true that I received the sacrament of Baptism. But it is also true that I had no influence on this decision. I was six years old then and I formed my opinion about faith much later. I do not consider this event as something special in my life. We left our house and went to church. There were some rituals, which I didn't understand. I do not have any regrets about it either. I do not consider it as a kind of pressure from my parents. My parents were believers and that was an important part of their tradition and customs. However, nobody should criticize my later decision and opinion about faith.

I wouldn't say that I am an atheist. I am not sure about it; I do not have a clear answer to this question now. Am I an atheist just because I do not accept the Church as an institution? Or, maybe, am I just an agnostic? Nevertheless, this is definitely a process that is going on in me. For example, had someone asked me if I was an atheist 10 years ago, or maybe even 5 years ago, I would have certainly said yes!

It means that earlier you were an atheist?

Yes. I was lost somehow. I was not able to find the answers to my questions about religion and God. My questions were not sophisticated or philosophical questions, but simple naive questions of a young person.

Do you think that talks with a priest or a theologian would have helped you to find the answers to your questions?

Well, I'm not sure that any 'earthly' discussion or anything similar would have changed my mind. Maybe, only if I had experienced something unnatural, as I have experienced it lately. Perhaps, that could have changed my mind. Any 'earthly' opinion wouldn't have made any difference to me.

What is the Church and faith for you?

The Church is an institution that is alienated from Her main mission and the reason for Her existence. Now, it is a kind of profit enterprise. She defends someone's interest. However, it is not clear whose interests that She defends. The clerics are continuously sending messages through their sermons. But who could be touched by poor and miserable words and thoughts that are not based on facts and that are irrelevant to our times? Even if the sermon seems to be beautiful, the reality is something completely different. Therefore, I'm convinced that they are misusing their positions.

Of course, for every rule, there is an exception, but speaking generally, I don't have anything positive to say about those 'earthly representatives of God'.

Could you give some example?

For example, when I was a teenager, I knew a person who went to seminary and studied Theology. I knew him very well, his behavior, his reasoning, his sympathy for nationalistic political ideas... He was prone to quarrel and to fight... He was studying Theology and he behaved like that!? It is evident that he was just an ordinary guy; I would also say an evil man, and definitely not a living and walking saintly candidate for priesthood. However, this man will eventually finish his studies, just as most of students finish their education, which is nothing special. However, other people will look to him as if he is a divine representative of God on earth.

This example bothered me for a long time and I tried to find some meaningful explanation for it. However, the more I was thinking about it, the more convinced I was that it is only a great hypocrisy. I asked myself: Who are those people who are in charge of the education of such individuals? There must be some psychologists who should evaluate those who want to be priests. Even an ordinary man could realize that that guy is not suitable for such a duty, and that he will only work in the name of his own interests.

There are many other examples that support my thinking. We learned about them from the media. Here, I just want to mention only one, which, in my opinion, is the worst sin, namely pedophilia. It is just unbelievable that those who are 'the representatives of God on earth' committed such sins instead of preaching against those horrible sins. Nobody can convince me anymore that pedophilia in the Church is the invention of journalists or that there is a conspiracy plot against the Church.

Why is it happening? It is not surreal! I can't find a logical answer to it. Maybe, the problems with pedophilia appeared because the priest in the Catholic Church could not marry?

One more thing upsets me: I think that the Church should really distance Herself from the possession of material goods. Of course, in our times the person is valued according to his or her possessions, not their character. So, we can often see priests who get stuck in materialism. For example, you can see what cars they drive, how many of them had financial affairs, and how many of them have good relations with politicians and gain financial benefits

thanks to those relations. They should indeed distance themselves from politics.

Do you think God exists? If not, why?

This is a very complex question. I've been thinking about it since my childhood. I cannot explain why, but I relate the question of God's existence with human mortality and life after death. We are all going to die one day. I could die older than my mother, and my mother could die older than my grandmother. Thus, when we all die I could end up being the oldest one at the time of my ending of the earthly life. Nevertheless, I can't comprehend the perception of Heaven, according to which the residents of Heaven appear like they did on the day of their death. Maybe, it is just the wrong perception of Heaven. However, this perception bothers me and nobody has given me an answer to it so far.

I'm getting older and sometimes I find myself experiencing some kind of fear. There were some situations when I was going through some difficulties, and some persons that are close to me were praying for me. For me, it was funny, but some kind of miracle happened and things were getting better.

I think that science can examine and explain everything. Therefore, I could not accept the explanation that those miracles are the evidence for God's existence. However, when such miracles occur, a man cannot avoid some kind of fear. But that fear might come from the fact that we become aware that we are not going to live forever.

I would love nothing more than to be wrong. I would love to see that God exists. But I'm afraid that I won't get any evidence for God's existence.

I think that some smart people invented religion in tough times, like war times. Religion could be a very strong motivation since what could be more motivating than sacrificing one's life for God? If that hypothesis is correct, then religion is nothing more than manipulation.

However, I'm not saying that religion as such is something bad. There are also some good things about it. For example, religion might help those who are by nature very undisciplined. The Scripture contains all instructions one should always hold on to in order to be a moral person. Humans are generally not prone to be moral and therefore religion could be a very constructive element for human social behavior.

You mentioned before that when some close persons prayed for

you, miracles happened. Could you maybe give some example?

I cannot talk about it in detail since it is very personal. It happened three months ago. It was shocking that things changed so fast, in less than 24 hours. It was nothing material. I just wanted some things, which went out of control, to be fixed. And it happened. However, I need something bigger than that in order to become a believer.

I'm not claiming that God doesn't exist. Perhaps, thanks to fears that I have experienced in my life, deep inside of me, there is still hope that there is something out there. I'm convinced that many people are believers just because of fear. When I was talking with others about God and I mentioned Him in a bad way, other people were scared. They warned me that I shouldn't talk like that because God may punish me. That means that everybody is obsessed with God's punishment and consequences that might come out of not obeying the rules. Nobody talks about God; nobody believes in Him without having that fear.

Thus, I came to the conclusion that the more we are afraid of death, the more we believe in God. When people have a near death experience and stay alive, they often say that God's intervention saved them. However, unfortunately for me, I believe that science can explain it. For example, when people say that they saw God, maybe, they weren't sane at the moment, a shock caused some delusion. Science cannot explain some miracles. I think it is because science isn't well developed yet. I would really like to believe that those miracles are real; I would like to be a believer. Believers are much happier than those who are searching for rational explanations.

Are you open to accepting faith?

From once being a committed atheist, I am now becoming more open. Only fools don't change their opinions.

A big miracle is needed to make a believer out of me. Unfortunately, I think it won't happen although I'm leaving my heart open. Also, I hope it will be in a positive context, not negative, as people tend to talk only about God's punishment.

On the other hand, we as humans make our own decisions; after that, I think that God is the one that should decide if He should punish us or reward us for that. We have our free will, but how free is it?

Why do good people die younger than the bad ones? Is that some kind of

reward or what? Now, you can see the ‘illogical questions’ that are going through my head and because of them, I cannot become a true believer.

Is the faith for you positive or negative?

If religion is pure and righteous, preaching the faith is not negative. However, we experienced that religion might be corrupted by preachers who made a very dangerous tool for the ignition of war out of it. Here, I’m thinking about *jihad*. Holy war is something that uses religion in a bad way to start a war and any other kind of wrong doing. Such a religion cannot be justified. A pure and righteous religion is definitely a thing that can help humankind. A good religion can soothe the savage masses better than any kind of law. Generally speaking, I support religion until it becomes twisted and corrupted.

One can achieve Christian values without regularly attending religious services

Reflection on Christian Values from a Non-Practicing Christian

Interview with Martin, Slovakia
Interview Held in Slovak by Martin Mihalik
Translated into English by Branislav Kuljovsky

Key words: student at a Catholic university, religious education, ethic, personal
God, receiving the sacraments as tradition

You have studied at a Catholic university. What is your experience like in the university and in the Church?

From the first moment I set foot on the soil of my university, I could clearly observe that the university and its values bear the spirit of the Christian faith. It can also be seen in the motto of the university: "Forming the heart and mind." I think that it is indeed in these lines that I can characterize those three years that I spent there. In any case, the university was leaving room for people to form their own views. It was not that students had to adjust to the values and beliefs that the university professed. Students could choose for themselves and I felt a great openness.

I was not participating in events related to religious life such as religious services and the like because I do not take part in them at all. Yet, any official event was accompanied by religious services and these kinds of meetings were not omitted.

If I had to highlight something, it would be the very friendly approach of the professors. I have not seen them saying: "I am a professor; I have accomplished this; I have a degree..." They were very open people. I am very glad that I completed those three years there.

You mentioned that the motto of the university was that it forms the mind and heart. Now, if you were supposed to relate this to yourself, would you say that the Catholic Church or Christianity shaped your mind or your heart? If so, how?

I think that this school has changed me a lot. It shaped my mind as well as my heart. During those three years, I got to know and learned certain values that I previously had not known. Maybe, I lived in a hedonistic way compared to how I now live. But I must stress that this change was not caused by a full adoption of Christian values or by force. I have discovered values that can be identified with Christian values, or, rather, values that are supposed to show human beings how to live in a good and upright way. I have not discovered this through religious services or by attending group meetings where people talked about God, but I have come to this spontaneously during the classes and through contact with people who attended that school or worked there.

I can't accept all that the Church teaches nor can I accept everything that is written in the Bible. However, if the Church's teaching and the Bible are in harmony with the ideas of truth and goodness then I am willing to stand by them and would defend them.

I would emphasize that before I began my studies at this university, I had not thought about such things at all. Over time, as those three years went by, I was coming to these thoughts, and now, they have become an integral part of my life.

To what extent, in your opinion, do the values present in the Church, religion, the Bible, or the sacred books correspond to the Truth? Could you give examples, for instance, from the Bible or from the life of the Church, of something that you think is good, something that represents those good values that you are willing to follow joyfully. On the other hand, could you talk about the negative ones that discourage you, for example, from accepting the Bible or the Catholic Church as a whole?

I cannot give examples from the Bible because I do not know its contents well enough. If I do it, it would be only searching in the darkness. The idea of civic participation belongs to those values, which I agree with and know are also proclaimed by the Christian faith. I think that we should treat human beings as ends rather than as means. It is very important and nowadays, there are spheres where this distinction is not respected at all.

Furthermore, tolerance towards other people is important. It is important to leave room for people even if we find out that we do not agree with everything they profess, say, or advocate. Yet, it should not be a reason for their rejection. Moreover, God's commandments make sense to me. If we did things in the opposite way, if everything that the commandments prohibit was allowed, we would live in one chaotic society.

What concretely would I criticize? I think that from my perspective I have nothing to criticize. I could only criticize if I were directly incorporated, if I were an integral part of the Church, if I attended religious services, if I attended various events and understood more decrees and teachings. But as a person who, on the one hand, likes the particular values of the Christian doctrine, but, on the other hand, does not feel as an integral part of the Church, does not go to church, I think that I have no reason to criticize. A critic can only be someone who is actively involved in Christian events.

I cannot say what I do not like about the Church, but I can say what I do not like about Christianity as such. I do not agree with the idea of a Christian personal God. During classes of 'Philosophy of Religion', we were discussing the proofs for God's existence. None of them were sufficient and convincing enough for me to believe in God. I imagine God more in the spirit of ancient thinkers.

***To what extent do you deem religion tolerant or intolerant?
Where are religion and the Church not tolerant?***

There are certain targets that the Church is trying to achieve, but maybe, she fails to achieve them. For example, the Church expresses with great regularity her opinion on abortion and wants to reject it. I see a good intention in it, namely, an unconditional protection of life. On the other hand, we were taught in school that this issue is in the domain of the parent's free decision.

When it comes to abortion or other similar issues in the field of ethics of life and the like, the Church must realize that by acting in this way She is trying to stop scientific progress and this progress in the field of bioethics, for example, is unstoppable. Thus, the Church acts a little bit against Herself because She will never be able to succeed in this.

You claim that the Church is not sufficiently tolerant and as an example, you mentioned the field of bioethics and the free choices of individuals that the Church does not respect

sufficiently. Did you also have some other issues in mind?

It is very difficult to answer this. I cannot say in which domain the Church negatively enters into my life because that is not what is happening. What we are dealing with here is just my largely uninformed point of view. It is a view of a man that takes the Church as a phenomenon about which he knows It exists, but which directly has nothing to do with him.

And in the past? When you were at primary and secondary school, did you attend religious education classes or ethical education classes?

Yes, I took religious education classes in primary school. In high school, I had ethical education classes. It was my decision to take ethical education classes in high school instead of religious ones. My teacher, namely a female catechist did not manage to convince me to enroll in religious education later in high school. I took it as a class that I had to pass because it was mandatory. I approached all the sacraments that I have received during my life in a similar way. I took it as an inevitable part of something that is respected on the basis of tradition. I was looking at it all uncritically, with children's eyes.

Did you perceive it as an external coercion, as something that was required?

Young people, in elementary school, are subject to the influences of their environment and they would do everything they cannot avoid. However, I think that they generally feel aversion towards religion. If you asked them about it, they do not know how to explain it or they would not talk about it.

I think that a human person comes to God over time and must make an effort to find the way to God. I, myself, was raised in the spirit of Christian values; I received the sacraments but the theme of God has never been a topic in our home; we have never talked in-depth about God.

Why was it then that your personal decision to take an ethical education class outweighed the external pressure?

The religion class in primary school did not make an impression on me; it seemed useless and did not give me anything. Therefore, I opted for an ethical education. I wanted to try something different.

I think that the personality of the teacher is very important. It is essential how he or she tries to attract young people to the topics. We read stories

from the Bible in religion class and those lessons were mostly boring.

Was the ethical education better?

It was better because I was a little older and I began to reflect a bit more about what we were taught there. Perhaps, if I had had religious education in high school, I would have thought about those things much more than I did in primary school.

It could have been counter-productive if a young person at an early age takes religious education and it is not very interesting for him or her.

I think that religious education in primary school must be an extension of what is happening at home. The latter must support the former. If a young person never deals with problems at home, questions and topics about God, and is just thrown into school where they explain to him or her some parts of the Bible, it becomes counter-productive. I think that there is rather a small percentage of people that will find this attractive.

The sacraments were the moments when my family talked about God, when we somehow met God. But afterwards, it disappeared. I received the sacraments and that was it. This issue has not been discussed any more. I was told to go to Confession, to go to church regularly. However, I was young and when a young person does not see an example in his or her parents, when a parent does not take him or her by the hand and bring him or her there and does not explain over time why we do this, the young person will cease to do it.

It was the same with my grandparents. They were there when I was receiving the sacraments; they go to church every Sunday, but I have never been raised to do so.

In high school, the questions about God were completely strange to me; rather, I tended to mock people who thought in this way. But afterwards, I have freely decided to study at a Catholic university where talking about God was more present. I have realized that there are certain values that I am willing to share with the Christian world although I am not convinced that the personal Christian God really exists and that we all have to believe in Him because we expect salvation at the end of times.

What would you recommend to people who are searching and are still in primary school or in high school?

I would advise young people to listen to their inner needs and not to let themselves be unnecessarily influenced by the opinion of people who will not play any important role in their lives. Also, I would advise parents to teach their children from an early age to listen to their hearts. For if the children succeed in this, they might manage to discover God within themselves. You can learn a lot from your inner self. Maybe, your inner self will even tell you to live in a good and upright way and to respect other people and their worldviews. You do not need to be an integral part of the Church, but you have to listen to your inner self.

I really started to listen to my heart, its needs, and its exclamation marks at the university. There, it started to tell me what I do not do correctly; it began to ask me whether what I do is really good and whether I do it in a good manner. The inside of a person can be called - inner self, conscience, or some inner, spiritual principle of man. I think that this inner self is never wrong, and every time we try to deny what this principle recommends to us, we will pay for it dearly in some way.

What advice would you give to the Church? What should they do to have a better chance to get to that inner self of a human being, to have a better chance to encounter what is really important? What should they do and what should they not do?

Who am I to give them some advice? Perhaps, my only recommendation is that they should do what they believe, and if they have an impression that they do what they believe and if they do it well, they should hold onto it.

I cannot advise them to do anything else because the inner conviction is probably the strongest thing and I cannot and do not want to doubt it. No priest will come, knock on my door and say: "If you continue living like this, damnation will await you." That is why I will not advise them and tell them what they should do and what they should not do. Besides, I do not know it myself. However, they should tolerate the fact that not all people want to go to church. Not all people are asking about God in the way, perhaps, it should be.

It is necessary to follow our inner selves and I think the rest will follow. I would recommend it to everyone, whether it is a priest or a worker at a construction site, an atheist, or a scientist.

One day when you will have children and you will be deciding whether to enroll them in religious education classes or ethical

education classes, what would you do?

First of all, I would consult it with my wife and I would present my view of the issue to her. Then, I would hear her opinion and finally, we would come to a compromise. Now, I could answer the question as to whether I would definitely want them to attend religion classes. I do not know the answer yet because I do not have children at this point. Maybe, the actual experience with the beginning of life will open new dimensions, new spaces, new reflections...

When choosing your future wife, will her religious orientation play any role in it?

It will not play any role, absolutely not! However, it will be important only to the extent to which her religiosity will be reflected in her behaviour. I do not have a specific criteria or requirements for my partner. I think that these are the things of the moment when the harmony of souls comes about. I will rather look at the values she holds and whether these values somehow coincide with my values. Those other things are secondary for now.

After all, there are marriages when a European atheist marries an Indian woman and people do not bother about their different religions. Rather, they look at why those two love each other and what values they share together. I think that one can achieve religious, or more precisely, Christian values also without regularly attending religious services.

It seems that only unhappy people are invited to the Church

A Layperson Cannot Accept the Church but She Goes to Church Regularly

Interview with Daiva, Lithuania
Interview Held in Lithuanian
by Vaida Spangelevičiūtė - Kneižienė
Translated into English
by Jovita Demskyte & Vaiva Adomaityte

Key words: fear, false joy, Buddha, cohabitating, clergy

What does the Church mean to you?

It is an institution of some kind just like a hospital. For me, it is difficult to relate God and faith to the Church. Those are two different things for me. There is no correspondence between what is said and what I see. I really cannot make sense of it.

What do you mean by ‘what is said’?

I mean what the Church says about the Truth, about the existence of God. For me, God is some kind of higher matter, not God who just sits up there in the sky.

There are a lot of uneducated people in the Church. I also have to mention the Church’s teaching about the value of poverty. Just look inside the churches – they are decorated with gold; priests can barely carry their liturgical clothes due to the embroidery, but we, the onlookers, we should ‘be poor’. I have respect for the Church, which comes from my upbringing, yet the question ‘why’ remains. Why is one thing said and another thing done? This discrepancy is pretty evident for me.

Another thing is the cruelty of the Church during the course of history. The Church teaches whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also; love is everything and yet, they tried to spread this teaching through blood.

What do you mean by ‘through blood’?

I mean the Crusades, the Order of the Knights Templar, the entire history, Christ... Why can He not sit happy as Buddha does? I do not see why all Christians should be fearful? I myself am fearful too. As a teenager, I would compare – Buddha sits happy with his smile and his belly, rubbing it, with his bare feet, and our Christ – He is on the Cross. Blood is dripping from his body. How can you teach love through blood? Is this the only way? This is just to frighten people and to control them. I can even notice in myself that when something bad happens, first of all, I go to the church. Maybe, it is part of my upbringing. When everything is going well, I never hear the invitation from someone in the Church to be happy. They seem to invite only unhappy people to the Church. I think that ruling unhappy people is easier than to guide educated, thinking, questioning people.

When you say that the Church is full of uneducated people – do you have in mind priests or the churchgoers?

Well, I do not mean that the churchgoers are not educated. I rather mean that their knowledge can be limited. I may feel a lack of knowledge in certain areas too. I think that in the Church one must be open-minded. Some people are holding on to certain dogmas like a dog does with a bone. Some people are really limited and they should educate, develop themselves, and expand their horizons.

Do you think that all Christians are sad?

I think that the vast majority is. It is not that they are sad, but their joy is artificial; it is caused by religious ecstasy, it is not natural. When you talk to people who do not have faith their joy seems natural. Joy is a rare thing. I look at three thousand Christians being joyful at the same time and it seems fake. There cannot be three thousand happy people at the same moment.

And what about the unhappy people in the Church you have mentioned before and the comparison you have made between the happy Buddha and the suffering Christ?

I do not claim that Buddhism is better. I do not know it very well – but just have a look at those images – Buddha has a smile on his face and Jesus is covered in blood. If one is looking for joy, as I suppose, I would feel happier by looking at the smiling Buddha instead of turning to the bleeding Jesus. Each time I go to church I think – why rejoice? Here hangs the crucified bleeding person. Then I begin to think about the message of love and how to connect these two. It is too much for me: the passion of the Christ, the gold in the churches, and the teaching to be like the poor. Break bread and be poor then.

You always mention the suffering, bleeding Christ, but what about the resurrected Christ?

Well, each time I enter the church I see a six-meter high cross hanging above the central altar. Each time I raise my eyes, this is the view I get.

When I am at home, I thank Him. Now, I have learned to thank God personally for the day; I feel good when I do it. But I never feel the same in the church.

What is, then, the main message of the Church?

I think this is the political power to rule the people. You cannot control the masses in any other way.

And do you think the Church rules through the cross?

Yes, because there is some fear in it. I go to church each Sunday due to that fear. I am afraid of suffering a miscarriage. I promised myself to go to church.

Why did you choose the Christian church then? Why not Buddhism? Why does this promise come out of fear to go to church?

It has to be that way.

Do you still associate God with the Church?

I pray in church, but for me, it is difficult to relate God with the Church. Maybe, it will come when I will be old.

Why did you go to Confession? Because you had to?

I do not know. Probably. Perhaps it is necessary to tell someone that something happened. After this, you feel lighter, relieved. This happened to me once in my life, when I went to a cathedral for Confession after a longer period of time. The priest communicated in a way that I felt relieved. He listened to what I had to say. His answers were to the point.

But how many priests have the time to communicate with you in such a way? When you go for seasonal Confession and there are 25 other people waiting after you, you understand that it is just a routine. You just do your duty.

Could you tell how in various periods of your life – childhood, adolescent years - your religious experience and views about the Church were evolving?

In my childhood, religion was a sort of mystery. You just do what you are told to do. Later, I was a very rebellious teenager. I did not want to go to church. I could not get it. I would faint in church; I do not know, from fear or stress. I think that I was not even a believer then, maybe not an unbeliever, but indifferent. The words that I heard there were just empty words. Only when I got sick did they receive any meaning.

How old were you approximately?

Twenty, twenty-one; this is one of the most vivid memories that I have. It was at night in a hospital. It was probably the most sincere prayer. Maybe, I would have gotten better without the prayer too. Maybe, it is just a coincidence. I interacted with this higher power, Him. I confided my secrets to Him, things I would not tell to other people, my expectations, and my words of gratitude. This was my vivid religious experience.

Maybe my faith is a bit unusual, but I still consider myself to be a believer. I do not forget to make the sign of cross daily, to say at least ‘thank you’ before I go to sleep and in the morning, I ask Him to bless my day. This is how I do it.

What is the faith for you? You never name God in it.

For me, God is not a guy sitting on a cloud; He is some kind of higher matter, which is difficult to comprehend.

You make the sign of cross every morning. Does your absolute, higher matter God relate to the Trinity?

It relates. I do not deny it. I am okay with it. I do not want to change things.

Why do you pray?

Probably because I was raised that way. When you are a child, you depend on your parents and you act in a way that they want you to. You can kneel for half an hour and it is not hard.

What about Jesus; you spoke about the crucified Christ, but what about the resurrected Christ?

Why do they not portray Him as the resurrected Christ in the churches? Somewhere on the side of a church, in a small room, where few elderly people go, you can see the resurrected Christ. But at the main altar, you see Him crucified. If the Church would highlight the risen Christ – then I would enter a church and I would see Him raised from the grave, covered in light. But now, I just see a bleeding person in front of me. Why wear crosses?

But you are wearing a little cross as well. Why don't you wear an image of the resurrected Christ?

No one makes it. There is no culture of the risen Christ.

Why, then, do you need to carry this kind of cross, or would you wear the image of the risen Christ if you would have one? Why do you need it?

I bought this little cross in Italy. I liked it because it is unusual. There is no crucified Jesus on it. I consider myself to be a believer. Wearing this means something to me. But it comes from my upbringing and my habits. If we had a different culture, I would wear a different symbol.

Do you also see the crucifixion highlighted in the celebrations of Christmas and Easter?

The whole week before Easter morning is highlighted with suffering and the crucifixion. Only on that morning does He rise. That day is an exception. Christmas might be a joyful period. There is less of an emphasis on death.

Would you agree that there is a lack of knowledge and education or formation in the Church?

Yes. There are priests who are limited in their thinking. They are not going hand-in-hand with contemporary times. As there is a progress in technical things, there should be a progress in the Church as well. But they are stuck in the 18th and 19th centuries.

There are also some innovative priests, but the main tendency is not to coincide with contemporary life. If they change their approach, they would attract a lot of young educated people.

If you are a doctor, you cannot perform a surgery if your hands are weak. So if you are a priest, you also shouldn't talk to a large audience of people if you are not able to form a decent sentence. If they would take the progress into consideration, maybe, the discrepancy between my understanding and the Church would become a little smaller.

What should they do in order to make that discrepancy smaller? How should they present the Good News to someone like you?

Just have a look at my current situation – for one year, I am cohabitating with someone. I feel like I am at the margins of the Church. And there are many people like me. If I went to Confession, I would not receive absolution. Why do they reject us? The distance becomes bigger. The priest should come towards me. He should encourage me to change, to get married.

I cannot participate in something if no one talks to me. Now, no one communicates with me. Any priest would tell me: "Go away – when you are married, come back and we can talk."

I think that there are priests who would not say this. But you still would not go to Confession?

Why do I need to go to six priests if five of them would kick me out of the church and the sixth one would say: "Child, you should do this and this."

But maybe the first one would tell you what to do?

Or, maybe I would reach the wrong one? I know one person who was asked to leave the church during his parents' funeral when he was trying to confess. There are these rules that separate people who think differently. There are very few priests with whom you can talk normally. It is difficult to find them; it is similar to finding a good hairdresser or a doctor.

But you only know a few priests? If you were searching for a way to come back to the Church, a lot of priests would help and advise you.

I know that, if I get married, I can come back to the Church. But since they kicked me out because I am pregnant, why should I run back to them?

In a sense you kicked out yourself, no one told you that you cannot go to church?

No, I am still going to church. When you mentioned the interview, I started to analyze my situation. For the last ten years, I was going to church and I was not thinking of it. Only now, I started to think about this inner conflict. Once you start to evaluate the Church, you can see more clearly how illogical priests' sermons are. Why would somebody nag a person who came to church? If I already have come here, encourage me. But if they nag you, you might not listen to them the second time. I do not want to go to one church already.

But maybe you could go to another church?

I do not know if it can be achieved, but there should not be any difference in which neighborhood your church is in.

But people search for different things; they have different levels of education. Maybe you stand in the church feeling indignation and a person next to you says: "This priest told us great things."

Maybe, maybe... I cannot argue with this.

Do you miss the sacraments?

I would not say that I miss them. I received them because of my upbringing and social environment, without thinking about them.

Do you still believe in Matrimony and infant Baptism or would you just do them out of fear?

The sacraments of Marriage and Baptism are not a matter of the Church. It is the matter of my faith. It is given through the priest and it is given to me. I believe in the sacraments. I believe you can lean on them. But I believe in God, not in the Church.

Do you believe that God works through the sacraments?

Yes. He works through them, but you know that one is bread and another is a pie. The daily bread is given each day, but the sacraments of Baptism and Marriage are one time occurrences. And they are those pies, pieces of a pie.

Why do you want to live a sacramental life, to be in the Church – because of tradition or faith?

I do not want to be in the Church. I want to be a Catholic. For me, a church is a building, an institution, just like a hospital. When you need it, you go there. Faith is an entirely different thing. I cannot put these things together; I try, but I cannot.

But do you like that the sacrament of Matrimony can happen in a church? You can make this promise to God standing by a tree or close to the sea.

But I would like it to happen in a simple village church. I do not like those antagonisms. Be poor, be humble, be good, be sweet, but when in front of you, it is an entirely different thing.

And what about Christ the King? His kingdom has a place here.

This is too far, too mystical. These kingdoms... What kind of king is He?

Who is Christ for you?

He is God for me. I cannot even imagine it.

Person? Cloud? Strength?

Strength.

You said that you make the sign of the cross in the morning, and in the evening, you say grace. What about a personal and community prayer? Do you need others to pray with you; do you find it helpful?

No, I do not. I am a loner, unique. I always liked to do things alone.

Is there a need for a living community? You do not like the Church because it is an institution for you, but if it would be a living community full of healthy, normal people, would you like to belong to it, come to talk about your faith?

Perhaps, I would like that. But I would not like that only crazy believers would gather there. I would like a discussion because now, it is only a one way street there. If I would have an objection, everyone would like to prove me wrong; nobody would have a different opinion. However, I doubt that their opinion can be so unified; if this is the case, then, no one different comes there.

What do you think of the idea of faith discussions in cafés? Is it a new, contemporary way or a show of some kind?

I think that it is a show. No one talks about their own problems at a café. It is an intimate thing and I am an individualist, separated from the community. Maybe somebody else needs it. Maybe, it is not a bad thing after all, but I am not completely open to it.

Cafés are not your thing, the Church neither. How do you think priests and the people working in the Church should reach out to people?

From my point of view, they should spread a common, public message. If I hear that, I will come myself.

What kind of message should it be in order for it to be attractive?

That the Church is becoming more liberal, more contemporary. I liked a movie about an Orthodox church where a priest sits and talks to someone for half of a day. You know that he will wait for you, even though, you are different.

What about the current Pope's message that the Church accepts all kinds of people?

Yes, but until it really comes, I cannot say what kind of message it is. I am not an expert in these things, but from common sense, it will definitely take some time for this message to travel. One might not even live until that day.

There are many like me who feel the need for religion, but the framework offered by the Church is not suitable for us

A Young Lady Speaks about Her Faith, Experience in a Catholic School and Right Wing Politics

Interview with Panni, Hungary
Interview Held in Hungarian and Translated into English
by Richárd Papp

Key words: aristocracy, catechism classes, Catholic school, divorce of parents, the Church and right politics, elections in Hungary, conservatism, Catholic liturgy

How would you describe your family situation and your relation to the Catholic Church in your childhood?

Both my mother's and father's sides of the family are deeply religious Roman Catholics. My mother's family is a classic aristocratic family from Budapest. Her parents had ten children, which was typical for Catholics at that time. However, when it came to religion, they were more pragmatic than bigot Catholics.

My father's family are declassed aristocrats. When my grandparents moved to a small town near Budapest, the family's social status changed. That's why, in my opinion, they became much more like bigots. My grandfather passed away early. My grandmother's life is built on religion; for her, it is not enough to go to church but she also has to project the good Catholic image on the outside. However, despite such behavior, I would say that she is also a devout believer.

My mother has become more like my paternal grandmother. She is stricter and my father is more flexible. Part of this is that we used to live in a small city near Budapest where my paternal grandmother lives. My mother still lives

there while my father moved to Budapest after the divorce.

When my siblings and I were protesting because we didn't want to go to church on Sundays, my father would sometimes take us to the highest point above our city. There, we would read the Bible and eat crackers instead of the Host. All three of us children were very excited that we could skip going to church. My mom was not happy with it, but she couldn't do much about it. However, next Sunday, we had to go to church.

I went to a Catholic elementary school where religious education was part of the curriculum. My siblings attended public school and catechism classes in our parish. I thought that the catechism classes in the parish were more interesting because my siblings always got chocolate, ice cream, a slice of pizza, or whatever. I was jealous. In my school, there was nothing like that.

Later, all three of us attended the Catholic middle school where our paternal grandmother was one of the vice principals. It was obligatory for children to go to Sunday Mass; we would get stickers that we had to show to our catechism teacher during the week. From then on, there was no chance to avoid the Sunday Mass. Those who missed the Mass or did not participate in prayer got a principal's warning.

I didn't enjoy those Sunday Masses. The same things were repeated every time. The only difference was the music and sermons; there was a choir accompanied by a guitar and sermons were adopted for children and each time, they were different. Everything else was always the same. Even today, I can still recite the whole Holy Mass. I heard it so many times.

There were two priests who I loved so much. They were so cool. Both of them were good entertainers. They were telling us stories and used the Bible for children. That's when the John Paul II cartoon book came out and it was really nice. We got this book too. Then one of those cool priests left. Many people complained about it and cried, but then we got another one. He was amiable too and he had a great sense of humor. He drew cartoons and he was really good at it. For example, when we kept giggling and chatting endlessly, he called us 'mouth-engines' and he drew that on the board. He always used visual aids and we thought that it was really helpful.

At home, we had evening and morning prayers, but that faded after a while. Eventually, those joint prayers ended when the marriage of my parents hit rock bottom; I was eight years old then. They got divorced five years later.

When I was really little, my grandma had always been there. She lived

about two hundred meters away from our house. She kept us under control and made sure that we got the weekly dosage of Christianity. We went to church together; she took my brother and sister to the parish catechesis; she sat through the children's Mass. Although this suited my mother very well, my father was not happy.

Was there such a breaking point in your siblings' lives too?

It's hard to tell. My sister never cared about it. Now she works as a teacher in that school, and makes all possible efforts to avoid attending prayer time and to stay away from religion as much as possible.

My brother had his rebellious stage when he read Marx and listened to Buena Vista. However, it lasted for about two to three years. Now, religion is very important to him. He is a conservative Catholic and a churchgoer.

How would you summarize your Catholic socialization within your school?

In my opinion, the school was too strict. They could never make anyone more religious by forcing them to attend the Mass, catechesis, and the like. At least in my case, such practices created just the opposite effect: They pushed me away instead.

Once, we were learning about sins. I raised my hand and asked why we had to learn about sins at that age when there are so many other things we could be learning about instead. Why do we have to learn how fallible we are? Because of that question, I was sent to the principal's office. The principle, a priest himself, was very nice. He said: "Dear Panni, it's not a problem. You may have questions. There is nothing wrong with that."

In our school, there were also mandatory prayer sessions followed by Confession. Confession was not mandatory, but it was expected that we would confess. I did not want to take part in it. I was not going to confess to those who were my teachers. It would make me feel uncomfortable. No, I would never discuss with them any sensitive matters.

Otherwise, I don't feel the need to confess. All in all, I went to Confession maybe five times in my life. Deep discussions are more important to me. I have a friend, a priest with whom I grew up. We even dated when I was 18 and he was 19 years old. With him, I can discuss everything.

I was the only one in my class who refused to receive the sacrament of

Confirmation. I was 15 years old then. I said that I would go through it only when my relation to God became more meaningful, stronger; I mean my relation to God, not to the Church. My catechesis teacher as well as the prior of the monastery kept asking me every other day for a whole month: "Have you changed your mind? Why aren't you joining us?" My answer was always the same. At the beginning, they were nice; then, it seems that they were confused; then grueling. At the end, they gave up.

How did your family react?

They received it well. It was not a major issue for them. Of course, my grandma worked at school and she was probably not happy with it. She had to face the prior every day. However, she only tried to convince my parents to persuade me, but she never pushed me. By then, my dad was not living with us. However, he said that we were mature enough to make our own decisions so he would not insist on anything.

My sister didn't consider Confirmation seriously either. Eventually, she ended up receiving this sacrament, in my opinion, because of the gifts. For me, it was unacceptable. If I cannot go through it seriously, there is no reason to do it. Besides, the preparations for Confirmation demanded a lot of time. There was a class every Friday in the parish, and at the same time, I had English class and basketball afterwards.

However, I always had faith. But my faith was never within the boundaries of the Church.

My parents usually say that I never followed rules obediently. I often 'ran away' from home saying, "I want to be free". Of course, I only went as far as my grandma's house or climbed high up on the walnut tree. I was always a bit introverted. It was futile to insist on me doing something that I did not see the meaning of.

I'm the kind of person who tries not to hurt others, or to do something that I would not want others do to me. However, I don't think one has to be Christian to behave like that. It is part of being humane, not necessarily a Christian. My fundamental principles of life are to love my neighbors, respect others, be honest and straight forward. I cannot be otherwise, I cannot fake it. I think it is also a basic Christian principle.

My grandmother is different. She is a very 'Christian kind' of person - the greatest actress in the town. She admits what she really thinks only once in five years. We don't see each other often, but when we do, I stay with her the

whole day and we talk. On these occasions, she opens up a little. Otherwise, she is a typical lady that lives in a small town where everybody knows her, and where she has to keep up the appearances.

Do you take part in the life of the Church today?

Only on special occasions when there is something related to the Church in the circle of my family or friends like weddings, celebrations of Baptism, and funerals. In those moments, I am there, and I find it important to be there.

However, there are some things I would not do or say during ceremonies, like some prayers. If it doesn't go along with my convictions, I don't say it. If the prayer is about loving, kindness, and God, then I say it. I pray the 'Our Father' but I flip out on some small things.

For example, they changed the "Let us pray for everyone" to "Let us pray for many". This change disturbed me deeply. So much about Christianity. We shall love everyone, and everyone may go to heaven even if he or she doesn't believe in God. Then they pray for 'you and many'. Who are the 'many'? And what happened to 'everyone'? I get upset over these sorts of things, and refuse to say them.

During worship, I get very bored. Of course, it also happens that I get upset over some things. For example, during my sister's wedding, we had to pray for the woman so she would not cheat on her husband. But there was no prayer for the man for the same thing. I was standing behind my sister while we were supposed to say these prayers. I was one of her bridesmaids and a witness. I was thinking: "Should I walk out or start screaming?" The priest said: "Let us pray for the woman because of original sin..."

These are occasions in which my brother says, "Geez, Panni, drop it! Who cares what he says!" He always laughs at me. I just don't want to take part in something that completely contradicts my faith. However, I do respect those who believe in such things. I'm not going to ridicule them. I would just be happier if they thought a little bit more and listened to what others are saying. I respect the Church even though She doesn't deserve it.

When did you first feel that you do not agree with what you have experienced in the life of the Church related to its connection to Hungarian politics and national identity, and how has this changed over time?

In school, they did not openly discuss politics, but I knew that they

subscribed to *Magyar Nemzet*,¹ and formed their opinions based on that. They teach history from an interesting perspective. For example, they mention the communist ‘red’ terror, but they would not say anything about the nationalist ‘white’ terror. My Hungarian literature teacher would apologize in the name of the poet Attila József, for he was a communist.

There were two girls in our class whose fathers were active politicians; one was a socialist in *MSZP* (Hungarian Socialist Party), and the other was a liberal in *SzDSz* (Free Democrats’ Association). Those poor girls were practically targeted when the right wing party *Fidesz* (Young Democrats’ Association) lost the election. At that time, our teachers were openly expressing their opinions: “It would be better if *Fidesz* won; everybody’s parents know what they need to do, whom they ought to vote for; a good Hungarian knows what to vote for; a decent Catholic knows where to cast his vote.” They were totally open about this, because at that time they were convinced, there is no one in school whose parents would not share their views. One of the girls once walked out of class. She couldn’t listen to it anymore.

It was the teachers who started that ‘campaign’, and students pushed it further. In 2002, I didn’t care much about politics. My parents voted for *Fidesz* anyway, and I was not excluded at school. However, the whole thing was so strange. I did not fully understand why this was a problem. I knew nothing about politics.

I remember, in 1998, my parents were watching live election results and joyfully declared: “*Fidesz* has won!” This made a great impression on me. I learned that there are socialists and communists on one side and decent Hungarians on the other. The ‘commies’ and socialists were Satan. *Fidesz* and Viktor Orban were the obvious choice.

After the 2002 election, our teacher of Hungarian literature came into the classroom crying about what would happen to those who lived in Budapest: The people in the countryside could always gather some berries to survive. But those in Budapest, they would have nothing to eat; they would die on the street. He cried about his own destiny, and about the future of the country. This was the first shocking experience about politics that I had.

Two years later, I was shocked even more when the referendum for dual citizenship of ethnic Hungarians living in Transylvania and the neighboring countries did not pass. The same teacher came into class crying: “What were the voters thinking?! They were undermining Hungarian unity by not passing

the dual citizenship referendum.”

In 2006, priests in churches were saying: “After four terrible years of socialist rule, everyone knows who to vote for. Everyone knows which party represents Christian values.” I found that totally disgusting.

After ‘rubber-bullet’ demonstrations took place in October 2006, I was so disappointed. For God’s sake! Those on the right only pretend to endorse values they do not have. The socialists are much more sensitive than those on the right. Only the left wing politicians are concerned with poverty and equality, and in theory, Catholics should be concerned with these issues too. That’s a major heartache for me. If we take a closer look at the socialist value system, we do find Christian values there: a fine pattern of the New Testament and the life of Christ. On the other hand, on the right, there is conservatism, the manifestation of aristocracy, elitism, and the acceptance of social differences.

I don’t blame my family for having resentments toward leftists. They used to be aristocrats and the communist regime took away everything they had. But I do not share their views. I’m not a clear-cut liberal, not a rightist, not a conservative, not a leftist either. If I were to put myself in to any category, I would say that I am a classical social-democrat, but there is no such thing in Hungary. Regarding certain questions, I take a liberal stand; in others, I don’t. However, I firmly believe that religion should not be intertwined with rightist ideology. In many instances, they are not compatible.

After the 1989 transition, politics returned to the 1930’s. The Church did the same. Right-wing politicians and the Church supported each other by applying the same approach. In the ‘30s, the Church and political system were absolutely intertwined. I think that such a situation is similar in all other post-communist countries too.

In my opinion, the same is true for nationalism. Part of it is that in the regions allocated to the neighboring countries, Hungarian national identity was associated with the religious denominations to which Hungarians belonged. It is the same today. Therefore, when it comes to citizenship issues or the Treaty of Trianon,² they quickly pull this out and say: It is religious tradition that helps those Hungarians who live outside of the borders of Hungary to hold on to their Hungarian national identity.

In the ‘90s, nationalism was not as prevalent as it is now. Today, *Fidesz* presents itself as a Christian political party. This party is officially a coalition partner of *KDNP* (Christian Democratic People’s Party). The *Fidesz* and the

KDNP leaders were pictured with Pope Benedict XVI. They kissed his hand and the Pope blessed Orban's children. That means that those who claim to be Catholic should vote for those who claim to be Christian. When a Catholic sees those pictures, he has to vote for them. This is a very straightforward kind of politics. It wins people over. On the surface, it represents the whole Christian value system even if it is not reflected in their political activities. A coalition of KDNP and *Fidesz* is a very clever political maneuver in that respect.

Have you had, or do you have any conflicts with members of your family because of your views, or because of your attitude?

I had a conflict with my mother's new husband. He is a supporter of the *Jobbik* party³ and he is a staunch conservative Catholic or rather, it is better to say a typical old-fashioned Catholic nationalist. He insists that Latin should be reintroduced, that the priest should face the altar as before, etc. Nevertheless, he and my mother are not living according to the Catholic standards, i.e. they are not married in the Church. They cannot marry because my parents are not yet divorced in the Church, and her new partner has two marriages behind him as well. We often have personal disagreements, which always turn into political debates.

There is no conflict with my parents. They say that I can do whatever I want. They continue to go to church, and wait to have a Catholic wedding with their Catholic partners. In the meantime, they leave me alone.

Recently, my brother's son was baptized. The Baptism should take place during the Mass but I expressed my wish to skip the Mass if possible. My brother said that I could do as I wish. However, he added that it would be nice if the whole family was present.

When I mentioned this to my paternal grandmother, the tension arose. There is a sticky situation with my grandma. She still doesn't know that my boyfriend and I are not planning to marry in the Church. We are going to tell her about it soon. I think it will not be easy.

I visited her this summer on the feast day of the Assumption of Mary. Soon, the topic of the wedding came up. She asked whether we planned our wedding on a special day like some Church feast day. I didn't understand her question. Then, she continued to say that weddings on days like the Assumption would be most wonderful. I couldn't understand what Mother Mary has to do with my marriage. This triggered a long monologue on her

part. She accused me of neither fearing God nor respecting man, that Mother Mary is important not only for Christians but for all Hungarians...

Is there a place for you in the Church? Can you imagine getting closer to the Church?

The biggest problem of my relation with the Church is 'formalism', which is so much admired by many churchgoers. I do not care about their formalities nor do I believe that those formalities can help me to be a better person. Quite the opposite: I believe that I can be a better person only if I don't observe them. However, non-compliance with their formalities excludes me from the community. There are many like me who feel the need for religion, but the framework offered by the Church is not suitable for us. I could imagine myself being closer to the Church under different circumstances. Most probably, I wouldn't be an exceedingly active member of it, but I would attend church on a more regular basis.

For example, when I was young, I used to attend the Mass officiated by the Jesuits. The Mass celebrated there had all elements of the normal Mass. However, we sat in a circle, passed around the Bible, read the readings and commented on them. I found that useful and meaningful since I had a chance to express my own thoughts and to hear the opinions of others. Thus, I had learned a lot. I do not like the Mass where you just sit and keep your mouth shut. You keep repeating some words that you don't even think about anymore because you have repeated them so many times. You don't know what they mean; you don't even care to find out their meaning. Therefore, you do not reflect on it.

Thus, I could imagine myself being a more active member of the Church if there was a different approach and if there was a supportive community. After all, the Church is not such a bad thing.

Translator's Notes:

¹ Conservative Hungarian daily newspaper.

² The interviewee refers to the decision of the Paris and Trianon treaties following World Wars I and II.

³ Hungarian ultra-nationalist right-wing party.

I do not expect the clergy to agree with me, but I want my questions and doubts to be treated seriously

A Young Laywoman Writes about Unheard Female Voices in the Church

Essay Written by Czarna Owca, Poland
Translated from Polish into English
by Agnieszka Anna Ukleja

Key words: faith, clergy, dormant faith, criticism, obedience, dialogue, woman in the Church, the Church as stepmother, the Church as community

I was brought up in a very specific family. When my mom was still alive, religion was central in our family. When she passed away, my relationship with religion and the Church loosened up. So, since I was 8, these relationships were getting weaker and weaker. When my father was remarried to a woman who forbid us from participating in the life of the Church and who ridiculed any attempts of religious practices, the way I experienced faith was changed. However, I think that even then I did not stop believing in God. Weaker or stronger, I have always had an awareness of His existence. If I was ever upset about anything, it was about the attitude of the people in the Church. They saw my troubles and somehow nobody reacted. My occasional participation in the life of the Church did not give me much. Sermons, Confession, etc. sounded empty and meaningless.

When the second wife of my father threw us out of the house, I was forced to go back to our hometown. After some time, my 'return' to the Church began and it was a type of rebellion for me. Except for my aging grandfather, nobody in my family believed anymore. I distinguished going to the church from having faith. In such small towns like the one where I lived, almost everyone attended Mass. Why did they do it if so few people actually believed?

I was incredibly lucky to meet really good priests in my life. They were like outsiders; they wore combat boots and talked to you about absolutely everything. 'Faith' as such was still all about commands and bans for me then. Maybe, also about tradition, but probably less. I mean, what tradition? An atheistic one? I did not have a personal relationship with God. I was asking too much and not getting any answers.

Shortly before leaving the country, I realized the significance of what was to happen and I was overwhelmed by it, but I trusted in God. It was probably out of powerlessness. Half a year spent abroad made me reevaluate my opinions. Why? Because that's where I saw that the Church is about community. It is about being together with all those who believe: single, divorced, and married. I met a man who impressed me with his faith testimony. In the beginning, it was more for him than for me that I decided to change, but finally, the change was for God.

After returning to Poland, I decided to reorganize my relationship with God, to go on a spiritual retreat, and to try to build some sort of bond. I managed to do that. Today, I consider my relationship with God to be the most important one in my life.

My attitude towards the institutional Church has not changed much. I still have many questions. I criticize the flawed institution and the Polish episcopate. When it comes to the issue of money, Polish bishops always say that it is the problem of others and not theirs. That it is never a Polish problem. Sad, embarrassing, and distressing. When I raise my questions, I am at most regarded as a harmful clown because there is a general attitude that we all need to believe in Mother Church uncritically (as for me, She is more like a stepmother). This attitude is present even among those highly respected priests of strong faith that are very eager to help. Some of them played a very important role in helping me to discover God. Unfortunately, there is a wall between us when it comes to conversations about difficult topics. I do not expect that any priest or bishop will agree with me. What I expect is that all my questions and doubts are treated seriously.

I experienced the same attitude when trying to explore the current situation of women in the Church. From more or less sophisticated answers resonates one message: That's how things are; that's all. There is no logical dialogue, no serious treatment of questions about things such as: Who has the right to decide about the life of a woman when pregnancy threatens her life? 'She must die so that she saves her child' is the only response given. This scares me.

What right do childless and unmarried men have to make such judgments? Who has the right to ask a husband to 'kill' his wife to save his child? I grew up without a mother; you can't imagine how often I wanted to die, how many times I asked her why she 'just died'. Of course, she did not just die because you do not choose to have a terminal disease for yourself. I do not know which option would be good in this matter. I believe, no matter what the decision is, it should be respected and not judged. I would never like to face it myself.

Formally, I still remain faithful to the institution of the Church. I am not disallowed from receiving the sacraments nor am I excluded from the community.

I think that there is a place for me in the Church, but understood as a community built up on Jesus Christ, not as an institution built on blind obedience. This applies especially to the Church in Poland where every criticism is treated as an attack on the clergy and the institution. As a secular woman, I have no influence on important decisions that ultimately concern or may concern my life.

As a secular, relatively young unmarried woman, I do not feel fully accepted by the Church. People who are formally single are seen as a threat. Nobody even tries to use their potential. What would be the reason to do it, right? If they do not have any children, they bring no more faithful souls to the Church: The more children, the more faithful. Why don't I leave Her?

I think that the Church as an institution is sick, but does not break apart because She has a strong foundation.

I could not find my own place in my parish

A Young Woman Writes about Her Way into Faith

Essay Written by Ariadna, Poland
Translated from Polish into English
by Agnieszka Anna Ukleja

Key words: faith, traditional way of life, avoiding of some churches, priest, dormant faith, religious 'events', prayer, sermon, rebellion

Faith is a mystery, and it's a gift from the Spirit; you either receive it or you do not. This mystery can be only understood by those who experience it. It's hard to talk about it. Personally, I feel that the Spirit is born over and over again in me and I feel the need to be reborn again and again.

I come from a small town where I grew up in a religious family, which, maybe, did not express strong faith, but was a religious one. When I was a kid, I had to attend what I later defined as religious events: attending the Way of the Cross, the rosary, parish retreats, Advent celebrations, or being a flower girl during the Corpus Christi procession. I was the only child from my neighborhood who had to do that. Other kids could play outside at that time. It really bothered me and I fought countless 'crusades' in defense of my religious freedom so that I did not have to attend all those events. Eventually, we came to a compromise that I had to go to church only on the days marked with a red color in the liturgical calendar, and the days marked with blue, I could skip. With age, I started to skip different prayers or events marked with red, which was a huge secret hidden from my grandmother. She just could not know about my absence in the church.

My contact with God was what I would call 'proper'. I went to the church every Sunday; I offered different prayers and requests to God. I considered God as a request box to which I addressed different requests and intentions. There was no room for thanksgiving in this box. I asked God to help me with

my problems at school. I even went on pilgrimages that were so popular then; by joining my friends on those pilgrimages, I wanted to fulfill my obligations and have pleasure as well.

In the end, I did not succeed in fulfilling my obligations. I was never thankful for God's love; even though He heard my requests, my prayers still had a penitential character. I prayed to ask for forgiveness for spending the Easter Sunday Vigil in the bar and drinking too much. At this stage of life, I attended church to keep the tradition alive and to have peace of mind.

Concerning the many tragedies that I experienced in my life, I did not want to add another struggle. But I was disgusted with what I saw happening in the Church: The clergy covering up all the problems in the Church, getting rich with the money they receive from pious people who supported their work. I did not fully participate in the sacraments; I did not believe in Confession without true repentance and back then, I did not see the possibility of stopping my relationship, which on the one hand, caused so much pain but on the other hand, it was a source of hope that things would somehow work out.

At that point in my life, I happened to meet a guy on a train. We stayed in touch through the internet. He was a believer not ashamed of his faith and he tried to convince me that there is a place for everybody in the Church. Listening to my laments about the Church, he suggested that I visit a university parish in my city.

All in all, I cannot explain why I actually listened to him and went to that church. But I went and... I liked it. The priest gave a nice sermon; he spoke about things that reached me personally and that I could relate to. From then on, I attended Masses only there; it was my way of expressing my rebellion. I did not feel good in my own parish; I could not find my own place there. And this was just the beginning of my new path though not all the things that I have encountered on my way have been perfect. Even though you are a part of the Church and even though you want to be more involved, you still might experience certain exclusion and learn that the Church, though universal, is made up of people who tend to make divisions between each other, distinguish some, and depress some others. But despite everything, it is possible and worth searching. Sometimes, you have to try hard to understand; in the end, you need to forgive and forget some things. By being with people, we are also experiencing God through the way in which He comes to us. God is patient and cares about every single sheep, especially this lost one.

I also owe to many people the way in which I experience my faith today; to those who shared their own faith testimonies, those who tried to, as far as they could, understand me, and also to the great priests who dedicated some part of their busy schedule to accompany me on my way to God. It has been filled with difficult returns, stagnation, and sometimes, regression. And thanks to all these experiences, today, I can look at my faith journey with more and more joy, trust, and confidence, and I give thanks to this university parish, which has no oak benches and marble floors, but it is filled with people.

A Formerly Active Layman Talks about His Disappointment with His Fellow Parishioners and Parish Priests

Interview with Jurci, Slovakia
Interview Held in Slovakian and Translated into English
by Branislav Kuljovsky

Key words: parish priest, Christian communities, engagement, arrogance, hypocrisy, envy

Can you find a place for yourself in the current state of the Roman Catholic Church and if yes, could you fulfill yourself not only as an ordinary person, but also as a professional who has many talents?

I think that it is possible. The Church is a large institution. Therefore, I believe that everyone could find his or her place in the Church, or a group of people with similar interests. Another question is whether he or she wants to have a place there, and whether he or she will be accepted.

Despite the fact that the Church is a huge institution, She consists of many small parishes and specific communities with concrete people. Some of them are very enthusiastic about being part of their congregations. There are others who think more independently, which often makes them unpopular. However, these are precisely the kind of people who, for example, could contribute a lot to their communities.

This is exactly my problem. I could contribute but I'm not sure if I want to do it anymore. No, I know that I do not want to do it. I have no motivation to do something for the communities in which I was active in the past. If people in those communities do not want to move forward by themselves, I

cannot do anything. If they are tired of being pushed away from following their stereotypes, I cannot bring them anything new. Thus, if I cannot bring anything new, then there is nothing that might attract me to stay in such communities. What annoys me is when a community wants to move forward, and yet, it is unable to accept any suggestion. If we are to do it half-heartedly or badly, then let us not do it at all.

I have met a lot of double-faced churchgoers who get on my nerves. However, I know the same kind of people among unbelievers and Buddhists.

Once you were a very active member in your parish, correct?

Not anymore. I simply moved out.

Oh, you moved out? What was the reason for that?

It did not happen overnight. At that time, I was studying at the university and I had very little free time for volunteer work. I used to play the organ for evening Mass and there were a few singers who used to sing the Psalms. Of course I do not expect that everybody will be willing to sing each time. Sometimes, people are not in the mood or their voices are hoarse. However, I had to always beg someone to come and sing. Or sometimes, I made an arrangement with someone and then he or she did not show up.

Thus, I had problems with organization, timing, and I was not ready to obey everything like a laboratory mouse. I asked the parish priest for help but his answer was: "It is your problem." Then I said that I could not cooperate anymore under those conditions and I returned the organ keys.

That is how it ended. Some people complain that it not easy to cooperate with our parish priest. On the contrary, I think that it was easy because he always said what he expects from you frankly and straightforwardly. Therefore, we had many conflicts, but we resolved them relatively quickly.

It was an experience with one particular parish and one particular matter.

Yes, but very similar things happened to me in several other parishes. There are three problems that I have very often encountered in the Church in my experience with believers and clerics: arrogance, conceit, and envy. They feel like they are superior to others.

My boss at work never behaves like that even though he is an expert and has much more knowledge and experience than I do. When he needs to solve

something, he does it as a human being. Why can a person, from whom greater awareness about morality is expected than from a businessman, not behave like that?

Of course, sometimes, all of us can be in a bad mood. However, that does not mean that we are allowed to shout at the saleswoman in a shop or complain without any reason to her just because of a bad mood or, even worse, because someone yelled at us at work. Such behavior is not acceptable.

We can make mistakes. It is human. Even a professional makes mistakes. At least I can admit it. No one can always be in a good mood, smiling, open, and happy either. But why would someone constantly speak using the 'conditional form', i.e. speaking about how things in life should be, while at the same time, he or she is not doing or practicing it themselves?

Some people's reactions are not just impulsive; they come as learned pattern responses from their inner attitude. Why do clerics and many believers behave in such a way? Is it complex or what?

Recently, I had a negative experience with a well-known priest in our town. He spoke with one of our editors. I listened to their conversation. We were preparing a report about a problem that his parish had with the city council. She was conveying to him the commentaries made by the city council. Obviously, he was not happy with those comments and therefore, he began to shout at her: "If you were a good journalist, you would find the information that our parish is a separate legal entity, independent from other parishes in our deanery." She was stunned at his reactions. At that moment, I intervened and said: "Excuse me, why are you doing this? I do not understand why you are shouting at her. She knows all of this well, but as a journalist she has to first convey the opinion of the city council to you in order to get your response."

He replied, "Well, if you were..." It was obvious that he completely ignored my question. I interrupted him again: "I know you very well; I have heard you preaching many times." I also told him who his classmates in the seminary were, in which year he graduated, where he had served as a priest, that he was in Rome for a certain time - I remembered those things for some reason. Suddenly, he completely changed and said: "Sorry if I have offended you."

Could it not be like that from the beginning? Why does he have to shout at someone? For God's sake, he is a priest. Do you know how many people have such experiences?

You mean with priests?

Yes, but also with believers... Well, it is not that each believer behaves like that all the time. But it is happening more than I am ready to tolerate.

Such behavior discourages and disappoints ordinary people the most. They are not so much interested in dogmas and Church doctrines but whether a believer would bring a chair to an old man. If the behavior of believers is such that ordinary people in contact with them do not feel good, it will not lead anywhere. It will never go in the right direction, no matter how good, right, or true the teaching of the Church in theory is.

In what way did such an experience discourage you? Do you have a negative view of the whole Church, or do you think that it is just a problem of those particular people? Do you think that there may be communities that do not have such problems?

I do not know how to sum it up. My position is that I do not need to belong to that ecclesiastical elite of a given parish community.

People who talk less about morality are much more interesting. They often live a better life too. My impression is that those people who talk much about these things are those with whom I have had such a bad experience.

You mean people who talk about religion?

Yes, about religion and morality. I mentioned the priest, but ordinary people belong here as well. Usually those people, highly valued by the parish priest, have the greatest problem with arrogance and envy.

When some people in my first parish saw that I bought an Audi A8 they almost burst. I heard them talking about me. When I said that I also had bought a house, the same sort of people, who live in our new place and who also belong to those higher valued people at the parish there, were amazed and needed to know where I got money for it. They needed to occupy themselves with such things. Maybe, I would not have even heard it if they, morons, would not talk about it just in front of my house.

Do you have such a bad experience with those people who are outside of the Church and who do not consider themselves such morally good persons?

I cannot say that I have had absolutely no such experiences, but much less. First of all, I do not want to judge and say that someone is good or bad.

According to what criteria would I do that? I cannot judge it according to myself because we all have some characteristics that other people do not like.

I myself am impetuous and stubborn in some matters. For example, I have no difficulties in telling someone that I do not like something; and maybe, sometimes, I say it in a vulgar way. This happens to me very often. And someone may have a problem with that. Thus, I understand that I do not like some things, but why are some people constantly busying themselves with someone else's matters?

When I said that I worked in television production, young people from my first parish started to automatically disparage that TV channel right in front of me. They asked how many people watch it, whether it is meaningful to work there, etc. People primarily look at you through how they used to know you. But this is not their business. Even if I do it only for myself and watch it only myself and receive payment for it and do it well and enjoy it, what the hell is it to them? And even if I do it for my pleasure, so what? Why can they not support me? No, they have to derogate it in front of me.

Those ordinary people, those less stigmatized by Christian communities, they have no problem with that because they are not so hypocritical.

On the other hand, I had conversations with some people who were raised in such religious communities as you were and then started their jobs. They told me that the lifestyle of people who were not shaped by religious communities was very wild, that the interpersonal relationships in the secular world are far worse than the ones among Christians. However, your experience seems to be different, right?

Yes, these kinds of people are closer to me. Some such people who are not formed are more animal-like. Compared to the decent well-educated people, they look really vulgar. They often had different experiences, and this may be a problem for someone. However, what annoys me is hypocrisy, arrogance, and conceit. Other people, on the other hand, might have no issue with that. It is simply a matter of personality. I am not saying that this is a universal truth. This is just my opinion. For example, now, we can find two or three hundred people here in 10 minutes who will not agree with me. They would not mind those other things but they would have a problem with me. I would probably be a little too distinguished for them.

This comparison, the analogy between the two worlds is very

interesting.

That is what I said before. The Church is a very broad community and everyone should be able to find a place there. The question is whether they want it and whether they are allowed to find it. However, those who are not looking for their place will not find it.

For example, during my university studies, I attended music school and got a certificate that I am qualified to play the organ. After I had finished it, I did not play for a long time. I came to our parish priest and said to him that I would like to play some organ music in the evenings, and in return, I could repair some non-functional parts of the organ, play during weddings, funerals, and occasionally during the Mass if I have time and if the parish organist cannot come. Thus, we could help each other in some way.

The parish priest was looking at me as if I was some sort of moron who likes how the organ squeaks. I understood that maybe he had seen many people who were asking the same thing. Therefore, I told him that I had played the organ for many years. I even offered to pay rent because those large compressors can consume a lot of electricity.

And what was his reaction?

He did not give me any meaningful answer: "Well, you know, there is a sacristan; make an arrangement with him." I said, "Well, when I go to the sacristan, he will ask me what the parish priest had said. So I want to know your answer." He said: "You know this is not directly my business, and we actually have one organist here already." I said, "Well, if you have an organist, he or she might not be able to come and you will still need a backup. I am also willing to pay rent because I would really like to play."

He was not really engaging with me in any sort of conversation. He was looking at me as if I was some crazy man who just wants to get in there. Then I asked him for the phone number of that organist so that I could talk to him. He did not give it to me because it is a private number. I turned around and said to myself that this was meaningless. I will not beg anyone. So I went to one teacher that I know at the music school and asked him whether he would allocate some hours during which I could play the organ. He gave me a fair price. So, I practice there.

Even if that priest did not gain any profit from it, why did he not give me at least some normal opinion? I do not understand. Would that be such a big deal for him to give me an answer or show delight in the fact that a young

person can play the organ?

How big is the community in your current place? Do many people go to church there?

Enough. It is an orthodox Catholic town. These people are very religious. However, those really living their faith are just a few.

It is a pity that the Church does not seize the opportunity when someone wants to do something.

In general, I have no problems with religious people, or those young people from my first parish. Although, many people there pretend that they have never seen me. When I was visiting the pastoral center of my first parish last time to arrange something, a lot of people pretended as if they had never seen me before, and about 90% percent of people who are there now were there before. And I had no problem with any one of them, you know? But I cannot form a community with them, because I would tear them apart?

Yes, I understand that. You say that you do not find what you would need. Or maybe, not that you do not find it, but rather that you find primitive people who are unable to accept new ideas. For example, if someone wants to take an initiative, what he encounters is reluctance and repulsion.

Yes, a kind of mental shallowness. And this comes from people who talk a lot about morality. When someone is a believer, he or she sees things also from the theological perspective, but for ordinary people, it is rather the moral side that is important, you know?

Would you say that these people or this experience discouraged you also, for example, from attending the church?

No.

So, it rather discouraged you from being actively involved in parish life. But you did not lose your faith in God because of that?

No, it has nothing to do with that.

I hope that you do not think that I hate all people. However, if I have to answer the question of whether I can imagine my role in the Church, I must respond that I do not even want to imagine it.

Since I am quite involved and I have also heard other people's stories from within the Church, as well as priests, your story does not surprise me. I know that they are not always the most perfect or the wisest people, but it would be helpful if you could articulate it in your own way.

There is one more professional experience with another parish priest. He requested an increase of city government subsidies for the parish kindergarten and it was rejected. I asked him for a statement and he told me that he would write it. However, I did not receive his written pronouncement nor did he answer his phone. Since I did not want to do a one-sided report, I had postponed my article for some time and did something else instead. Later, he told me that he had had no time to do it and apologized. I told him that he could tell me his position in two minutes and I would write a written statement for him and send it back for his approval. He refused it and said that he would write it himself. Another week passed, and again nothing. Thus, he could not be surprised that I wrote that he arrogantly promised something for two weeks and did not do it.

Latter, people from the parish pastoral center wrote comments under the article that I do not like him and that I am taking out my personal revenge on him since I had had a problem with him before. Eventually, he called me and asked me why I had written it. I asked him: "Have I written anything untrue? I have offered you a chance to publish your point of view; you promised to do it, and I have waited two weeks for your statement! This is my job, you know. If I come up with an outdated topic that was an issue two weeks ago, I will get fired."

Do you also have some positive experiences with people in the Church?

Sure. I know some nuns who take care of children with serious behavior difficulties. The children might act impulsively and aggressively; they refuse to follow reasonable directions, and defy adult authority. They can be helped only through internal conviction, nothing else.

So this is what you see as a positive thing?

I know many people like that. We even had one appropriated boy like that in our family who went through something like that. From being a good-for-nothing person, he eventually became a pretty decent guy.

However, today he is in jail, but this is because of something he had done before. When they found out, he was unfortunately on probation. But all right, he will serve his sentence, and will be back to where he was. I believe that he will be normal again.

This is rather exceptional. Is there something more general that your parish does? Do you see anything positive?

When the priest who was here before, in our parish, saw me moving in, I greeted him, and so we got to talking. He told me that if I need some help he could give me contacts of local artisans. They would be glad to have some job and I would pay less and have my problems fixed. I appreciated his support a lot. I was new there, knowing nobody, and there were so many things to be done. Unfortunately, he was there for about three weeks and then he was relocated to another place. With the new parish priest, I have not really found a common way; he would not even talk to me.

You can make mistakes, but to repeat them - that is just nonsense

A Church Employee Speaks about His Visions of the Church and Difficulties at His Workplace

Interview with Thomas, Slovenia
Interview Held in Slovenian and Translated into English
by Matej Purger

Key words: traditional way of life, priest, pedophilia, supplement to the Church pastoral, identity, double life, exclusion, official teaching of the Church, empathy, tolerance

I am running my car on a winding road descending and ascending slightly between the small rolling hills, among the vividly green forest. Just before I am about to reach my finish line, I come across the first house, where the freshly mowed grass is consistent with its surroundings and the colorful beehive is but the icing on the cake of the neatly organized farm. I continue my ride towards the neighbors. There, Thomas is waiting for me. He is the 2nd generation of Argentine Slovenes who saw the homeland of his parents for the first time in 2009, and made it officially his home when he was 53. Thomas is a husband, a father, and a grandfather. And he was willing to share his story.

Mr. Thomas, do you like going to church and to the ceremonies?

Yes, of course. I cannot imagine a weekend without the Church and the Mass, I need it.

What does the relationship with the Church mean for you personally?

After my recent experience, priests and the Church stand primarily for the administrators of the sacraments for me. Since our faith is sacramental, there is no other way to receive a sacrament but from a priest. But the sacrament

works within me or within my relationship with God. The material dimension of the celebration, which is my contact with God, is always administrated by the priest and hence by the Church. I accept that. Yet, here in Slovenia, priests behave like landlords or aristocrats. I noticed such an approach only in Slovenia. In Argentina, on the contrary, a priest is ‘a father’, ‘padre’ above everything else. Even Pope Francis is Padre Jorge there! And that is an enormous difference; I can see it. Unfortunately, here, the priests do not act like fathers.

One priest in Argentina once said, “Priests are just God’s loudspeakers, nothing else. Do not think that the priests say only what suits them. Priests primarily are the messengers, the instruments of the Holy Spirit.” I replied quickly that not all loudspeakers are of the same quality!

Do you think that personal faith depends on the Church and its representatives?

When an individual is being formed, priests are certainly extremely important, then we depend on them. When we are young, we go for spiritual retreats. How else are we to learn about God, if not through a person, a priest, a pastor? When you are young, it is impossible to learn about God in a different way.

Once you have reached a certain age and having heard all the Gospels a number of times, a priest cannot tell you anything new anymore. Well, there is always a possibility of a new interpretation that can certainly help you to understand the Word of God. But there is a difference between me, having been formed already, and somebody younger, a teenager, who cannot learn about God in a way other than through somebody that he trusts.

You came to Slovenia, the homeland of your parents, for the first time in 2009 and then stayed here, is that correct?

Yes. My older sons came to Slovenia after their studies. I came to pay them a visit, to see this land. Then I received an offer to be the caretaker of a center for spiritual retreats. Since that was what I was doing in Argentina too, I grabbed the opportunity. I called my wife and kids and told them to come to Slovenia. A few months later, I signed the contract of employment with a diocese here.

What happened later?

After two or three months of working for the priest who was in charge of

this spiritual center, people started warning me about his inappropriate behavior. I really had no idea what supposedly was happening until I spoke with the psychotherapists from Gostečnik's circle.¹ Gostečnik worked with his victims too.

Still, I could not believe it. Shortly after this event, I mentioned the incident at a family lunch. Then my sons told me that the priest would also try to harass them. I was horrified; I could not believe it. My sons stood up to him in time and did not let him continue. But what about others?!

I reported the matter to the responsible person in the diocese because I thought they knew nothing about it. I was told that I should make an official statement and send it to the bishop and nuncio. In the diocese where I was employed, they told me to take a sick leave and that they would take care of everything.

What was the course of action of the diocese?

After some time, the bishop called me and apologized for the situation. During our conversation, he ensured me that he would take action and that he would make sure that the matter got resolved.

Unfortunately, on that very day, the bishop was hospitalized. A few days later, he was deposed from his ministry. At that time, other people from the diocese instructed me to continue with my work at the same spiritual center although the priest that I had reported was still there.

He openly threatened me, both verbally and by mail. I still keep these letters because people do not believe me. Since that priest was not removed, I expected to be relocated. Firstly, they sent me on sick leave, and later on, I was finally relocated to some other 'made up' position in another center.

How does this story end?

Hard to say. Those who were responsible in our diocese ignored me for as long as they could. Nobody wanted to have anything to do with me. In the meantime, I sued them for the breach of employment law.

Then a new bishop arrived. I tried to explain the whole situation to him and asked him to act urgently. I respected him since he was a great scholar. However, in my disappointment, he replied: "Do you think that I have control over all the priests in the diocese?"

Can you believe it? A bishop said that? Who else could be in charge and

responsible if not the bishop?

Later, my sons were invited as witnesses to the ecclesiastical court. Two years later, the court verdict arrived. That priest was suspended and removed from all ministerial activities. Two days later, he was found dead in the mountains.

What happened? Did he die in an accident while on his way to the top; was he killed or did he commit suicide?

I do not know. It seems to me that nobody knows.

So how does the local Church face these kinds of problems?

The Church does not listen and does not act in time. Priests strongly protect each other; they protect the Church. I could try to understand that. If I faced a problem within my family, I would like to resolve it within the family context. I would not be willing to publish it in a newspaper.

But, on the other hand, the Church is still a part of the state and its legal system. Was the priest not wanted by the investigators in the end?

Certainly. But it could have been prevented if the truth had been noticed in time, if we had talked and thought together about what had to be done.

In Argentina, we had a similar case. There was a priest who abused children and now he is in prison. However, it was not an easy situation. Although he abused some youngsters, he also helped many of them by sending them to school. Since he helped thousands, some people took his side. But that is wrong. Even one victim, one human, one child, is one too many! That is what they should have done here...

But here, nobody wanted to report the priest who abused the youth. Even when he was reported, the Church authorities were reluctant to start the investigation and other legal procedures. Nobody initiated civil or criminal proceedings. On the contrary, the practice here was that 'victims' should come to the diocese with a good lawyer and the dispute would be quickly arranged. I was advised to do the same. Oh please! If the procedures are tackled properly, there is not much we have to arrange because everything is clear. Let us tell the truth about the matter, only that.

Did you have the support of your surroundings, your fellow

townsmen, and fellow faithful?

In that place where we lived, no one really knew what was going on. But his family, his sister and her husband who happened to live nearby, knew. I also said to the parish priest what was going on. He made the house near the church available for me and my family to live in.

In the beginning, I was absent from home often, but when the diocese sent me on a sick leave, I was staying at home. Then my parish priest asked me what was going on, why I did not go to work. I gave him a letter to read. That was an official statement of the diocese. After he read it, he told me that he believed me and that I should not worry about the house where we were living. I felt his support.

But he was worried because the priest's sister from the spiritual center was a catechist in his parish, and she was well connected to the parish board. Later, the word got out and some people attacked me. But there were also people who supported me. Soon afterwards, the whole province knew what was going on. The vast majority of the people did not care at all because the churches are empty anyway.

How did this affect your relationship with God?

A Franciscan, who was my confessor and initiator of my moving to Slovenia, was up-to-date with all the events. Before I went to the diocese, I consulted him and told him about my intention to report the priest and I asked him whether he thought that it was morally correct. At that time, I didn't know whether that priest indeed abused other children or not. That was what I heard as rumors, but after my sons told me about their experience, I was determined to act.

My confessor advised me that I should report what I knew to the Church authorities. If I was wrong, I could always apologize to that priest. However, on the other hand, if I was not mistaken, then it could prevent another child from being abused.

During my torments, I asked for God's help. I was hesitating about what I should do until the very last moment. What if I accused someone who hadn't done anything wrong?

After this happened, I was also thinking about a car accident that affected my family in '89. I had a feeling that God slapped me, that He wanted to change the course of my life. And I had indeed leaned on Him.

I chat with God a lot, the same way as I am chatting with you now. There is lots of evidence to prove that He protects me and takes care of me. What sometimes appears to me as extremely difficult, later on turns out to be the most valuable experience and the best path. After that accident, I confided myself in God. If my conscience is clear, then God will provide everything else.

Even though it was not entirely clear to me what the right thing to do was, now I know that I made the right decision. It was first confirmed by my confessor and later, also by the outcome of the process. In between, I had to endure a lot. And my relationship with God was made stronger through this experience.

How has this changed your relationship with the Church?

I am so sorry for saying this, but in my opinion, the leadership of the Church in Slovenia is below any criticism.

What is the Church? Is it universal or is it national? If it is universal, then for me, nothing has changed. Sometimes, I feel like John the Baptist who was crying out and finally, they beheaded him.

I would describe the work of the local Church as throwing Catholics out the window! Peter Opeka is making an effort to welcome all people in Madagascar to the Church and to help them, especially the poorest. And here, they are throwing people out of the Church. Still, this is the very same Church. However, since the Church is universal, common sense will triumph. I have no doubt about it. I stick with the Church. But these are local problems that I have encountered here in Slovenia...

After your experience, do you think that there is enough willingness for change within the Church?

The gap between the clergy and the faithful is huge. It seems that we, Catholics are on two different banks of the river. I really hope that Pope Francis will narrow this gap. He did say that priests should go out of their offices to the people. However, the situation here in Slovenia and in Europe is not similar to the situation in South America or Africa. Here, I feel very distant from the hierarchy. However, I do not feel that distance from Pope Francis.

The clerics are inaccessible. The Son of God has shown us how things should work. Christ was among his apostles, and among the people. We only

have to follow Him. Nothing else. I hope that the Pope will succeed in changing something. However, if I understood properly, there is not much interest in the Vatican hierarchy to change anything. Francis has a clear idea of what he wants to do, but will he be able to accomplish it?

How do you see the Church today? If you compared it with the view you had before this unpleasant experience, do you resent anything?

No, it's just the opposite. If anything, I feel even more connected with the Church because I know that we're going the right way. With every traumatic experience that I have had in my life, and there have not been a few, I have become more and more connected with the Church. I was not angry at God, but on the contrary, I have felt more connected with Him. Without it, there would be no faith.

I'm convinced that there is a reason why this has happened. After the terrible accident that I had back in Argentina, two of my daughters were in critical condition. I accused myself of many things. Above all, that I didn't spend enough time with them. When that happened, I had a conversation with Dr. Marko Kremžar. He is a very wise man and an important person in the Slovenian community in Argentina. He has also suffered a lot. I asked him: "Why did God not speak to me directly? Why through my kids?" Kremžar replied that any such thing, any such suffering is a grace granted by God. From this perspective, each bad, sad, or difficult situation has another meaning: Not from the human perspective but from God's perspective. That's what I remember from Dr. Kremžar.

Then I looked back and I saw a lot of things in a new light. And also in that accident, I experienced a strong call from God. How God slapped me and told me not to worry about money but about the family. And indeed it was so. We never lacked anything. We never had too much, but never too little. Everything else was less important, only that the children had contact with their father and mother. I was learning it slowly. In all this, God has led me and illuminated me.

There are also people who are sort of our guardian angels. So far, I have met three or four people who are like saints and who helped me tremendously on my path. I do not know whether others are also as privileged as I am. I always stay in touch with these people, either via e-mail or phone, and they give me some hope and offer the right words that help me.

Far from distancing myself from the Church, I am even more connected because I see that the Church will win and that the problems are, whether it is the greed for money or status, unbalanced sexuality, or something else, it is only temporary. We need to learn from our mistakes, all of us. Yes, you can make mistakes, but to repeat them, that is just nonsense. We have to do things in such a way that those mistakes are not repeated.

Where would you say your place in the Church is?

I am a sinner.

It is hard to say where I am. There are so many things that can go wrong these days in society. I believe that if I am consistent with my faith and thinking then somebody can lean on me. Then I do not have to be a witness to my faith by using a microphone, but by my life.

A bishop once said: "God does not expect us to succeed. He only wants us to do our work and the success will be His." We just have to strive to do what we can; nothing more is expected from us.

Taking into account your experience, what would you first change in the Church?

This might sound ironic but I would like to see clerics kneeling more in front of the altar and less before wealth; I would like to see them concerned more with divine matters rather than secular ones.

I am seriously bothered by the financial obsession of the Church! However, this does not mean that all ecclesiastical wealth should be sold because it would not solve the basic problems. But, for example, why should not all priests in Slovenia drive vehicles from Revoz?² Why don't they drive a Clio? For the Slovenian situation, one Clio is totally enough. There is no need to have expensive cars. Among the faithful, there are different people, even those who have nothing. And then, we all contribute at the collection. There is no justification for luxury.

I miss the Church that would do more for the people. The first Christians did not have much; they had few possessions, but they had more love for one another. Was that not enough? That's how the churches would be fuller these days. It is nice to see a lot of churches on the hills, but they are all empty; what does this mean? Priests must come to the people, and not to things.

A nice habit of the Slovenian priests in Argentina was that they were

invited by someone for lunch and then somewhere for dinner each first Friday and Saturday of the month. They maintained contact with the people from a certain place; they knew what was going on with them and knew their troubles, problems, but they knew their joy as well. Today, what we lack here is basic human contact. That is the first thing that I would change. Just as Pope Francis says, go out to the people!

Translator's Notes:

¹ Gostečnik is a prominent Slovene psychotherapist and a priest.

² The only car manufacturer in Slovenia.

A Church Employee Speaks about Social Insensibility and Financial Irresponsibility of Clerics

Interview with Saša, Bosnia-Herzegovina
Interview Held in Croatian and Translated into English
by Marijo Vukoja

Key words: Church employee, believer disappointment, hypocrisy of clergy,
organizational issues in Church

Is there a place for you in the Church?

Yeah, sometimes, I indeed feel like I have a place in my local Church. If there is something that I can contribute to, then I get invited. If they didn't need me, nobody would notice that I'm missing; nobody would phone me. I am not sure if there is a place for me in the universal Church either. I'm not sure anymore what the universal Church is.

Could you please describe your current situation?

I'm a lay person, an employee of a Church organization.

How long have you been employed there?

Almost ten years.

Could you say that you know the structure and the activities of the local Church?

Unfortunately, yes.

To be quite honest, during my time in school and later at the university, I was not much involved in parish activities. Everything I knew about the faith and the Church I learned from my family. That included going to church

every Sunday, the celebration of the major holydays: Christmas, Easter, All Saints' Day, and respecting others, especially those who are different from me. But I never thought much about my faith; I never searched for anything and I never asked questions. Through religious education in my parish and school, nobody motivated me to think about faith nor was I allowed to reflect on it.

Fortunately, and thanks to the person who has an important place in my life, I began to travel to various meetings of believers in Europe. At those meetings, I experienced a personal encounter with God. Only then, without anyone's help, did I begin to explore and read religious literature. But still, I had very little contact with my own parish or the parish and Church organizations in the place where I studied. As my journey continued, I wished that an active religious life, the one that existed in the Catholic Church in Europe, could also develop in my country. I never understood why the parish gardens couldn't become meeting places for parishioners.

Does it mean that, when you were growing up, these kinds of religious activities that you saw in Europe did not exist in your parish or in the place where you studied?

There could have been such activities organized in other nearby parishes, but I didn't know anything about them. Activities in my parish and Sunday schools were limited to cleaning the church, picking up the leaves in the churchyard and the like. For such activities, we were rewarded with sweets. There was no serious program nor was there any active witnessing of the faith and Christianity. For example, we could help someone in the village who was in need of cleaning their house, preparing firewood, etc. But we were not encouraged to put into practice what we had heard in the church on Sundays.

I felt very enthusiastic when I first started to work in a Church organization. I would say that during the first two years at work I tried to prove to myself and to others that I was able and competent. In my opinion, my work produced fantastic results and I felt very useful. The wage was not enough to cover half of my monthly costs. Although I was financially dependent on my family during those first two years, I continued with the same job because I felt personal satisfaction and I was happy doing what I was doing. The money was not the most important thing at that moment. God's providence and financial support from my family made me remain in that work place so long.

You found the parish life very superficial, but how was it in your family? Are you nostalgic about certain religious customs, events that are related to your childhood?

The faith that I received in my family is the reason why I still believe. That faith is livelier, stronger, and more concrete, compared to the faith that I acquired in my parish. There are only a few places where you can hear the prayer before and after a meal, or where the rosary is prayed. I remember that in my grandparents' house there was a time to say the rosary every evening at seven o'clock.

Even today, when I visit my family, I happily go to church on a Sunday morning. The whole family goes to Sunday Mass. That is actually how Sunday is supposed to start out. That is what makes Sundays special and different from all other weekdays and it reminds me of my childhood, youth, family community, and faith witnessing.

Today, when I think about the witnessing of faith in my family, both in the past and now, it is not the same as it is in the parish community. Our parish is very large. However, judging by the number of people in the church, you would never come to such a conclusion. In fact, it is not a community! There are no parish gatherings, no organized events apart from the Mass. And all that could and should be organized. It is actually the parish priest who is a stumbling stone, the same as the priest who was there before him.

I think that I was very lucky to have such parents, especially my mother, who taught me true values. However, she also acquired this knowledge from her parents and not in her parish. Mom was definitely the one who built up my relationship with God, faith and respect towards others, regardless of who they are.

You said that nobody encouraged you to question things about religion and that everything you learned about the faith you learned in your family. However, what do you think about this: Is what you learnt in your family based on religious values or rather on human qualities? To be more concrete, what if your mother was not a Catholic, or if she was not a believer, would she still behave like that?

Yes. I think so. She learnt from her family to be human, to be moral, and to help everyone. I believe that no matter what religion she would have been born in, she would still behave the same way and she taught us the same

thing.

What specifically changed in your life when you started to work in a Church organization?

I became very disappointed. I'm disappointed about how things in the Church work and how everything has so little to do with spirituality, faith, and sometimes even with common sense. I discovered another image, another side of the Church. That image is not beautiful and I would have been happier if I had not discovered it. There are some people who indeed deserve my respect because they honestly live out their vocation. However, they are only individuals – they are not the Church. The Church has become a large company that is directed towards profit, other material gains, and status. All other things are less important. The problems are swept under the rug and there is no intention to face or to solve them.

I wanted to bring my personal experience of faith and knowledge that I got abroad closer to the people that I know and the ones I worked with. During that period abroad, my religious life and my relationship with God intensified. I never had such an experience before in my parish. In my parish, I never felt that God loves me and that He loves every person around me. Nobody in my parish witnessed that and nobody showed me how it works in real life. I had to travel so far away and to cross so many borders in order to find out that God loves everyone equally, and that he asks us to do the same thing.

During the first two years, I would say, I personally advanced in a spiritual sense. However, afterwards, I realized that clerics in the local Church do not live according to what they are preaching. What they preach from the pulpit, they do not live throughout the week, or maybe, even an hour after they celebrate the Mass. Then I realized that the Church here is only one big well-established business company.

That's when I experienced the first disappointment and lost my willingness to be a part of, I would say, the church of 'men'. I believe that Jesus didn't imagine his disciples like that. Since then, I am trying to 'get out' of these 'circles' because I feel that I am withering. I feel miserable because I am part of something that I do not want to be and there is nothing that I could change. I have no one, except a few colleagues with whom I can talk about it. If I were working in a factory in very poor conditions, it probably would be easier. Working here is much worse because they are playing with human emotions, faith, morality, and that is what destroys you.

You mentioned ‘business in the Church’. What do you mean by that? Does it mean that people are doing something only in order to make money or to gain social status?

Both. When we talk about clerics, we should differentiate between priests and monks on the one side and nuns on the other. My impression is that nuns are the more honest part of the Church. They are still not corrupted or at least I do not have any significant experience with them being corrupted. Each of the clerics has his own small community, parish, or other organization in which he can behave completely authoritatively. The nuns are usually imperceptible since they are providing secondary services. However, those services are very important for pastoral work in small communities. They indeed work and they indeed pray. The clerics, on the other hand, eventually turn into – metamorphose – businessmen, builders, economists, managers, etc.

My impression is that they have lost their compass and that their so-called ‘spiritual-vocation’ is only a mask for achieving material goods. There is no spirituality; there is no fineness; there is no subtlety, no healthy witnessing of faith. They behave like ‘sheriffs’. They are not accountable for anything nor are there any sanctions for them...

You mentioned that you make a distinction between clerics and nuns in the local Church. How about the laity? What is the Church for you and what is the Church, in your opinion, for the people in the local Church?

I’ll answer your last question first. The vast majority of people identify the Church with the clerics and nuns.

From my previous answers, you can conclude what the place of lay people in the local Church is. If you take a deeper look into all institutions and organizations in this local Church, you’ll find that all directors, headmasters or principals of Catholic institutions and organizations, are clerics. They hold those positions, regardless of whether they have the abilities, experience, and skills for that kind of work, and regardless of the fact that there are non-clerics who might perform that job more professionally and better. Since the clerics were not trained through their education for those jobs, they have to learn how to do it by themselves.

And there are also some laymen. I can’t claim that all clerics and monks believe that laymen and all services they provide are not good. Part of them

definitely believes that those services are good. However, all of them are looking for personal benefits. If there is something they could benefit from - in any form - they are happy to cooperate. When they do not need you, they are very rough, rude, and even disgusted. Especially women who work in the local Church organizations are exposed to sexist offences and verbal harassment by clerics. This is not happening only in private conversations. They are not ashamed to be vulgar in public either. In their opinion, women have nothing to do in the Church. Sometimes, their behavior is so disgusting...

The laymen are generally employees. I must emphasize that for lay people it is very difficult to get a contract of employment.¹ If there is a contract, it is usually for a fixed-term only.² You might work for years and they just prolong your fixed-term contract. Generally, they never give permanent contracts. Depending on the organization, i.e. how their priest-manager 'interprets' the law, the fixed-term may be longer or shorter. However, the laymen are forced to accept all conditions. This is not surprising since the situation in the country is miserable and you do not have much of a choice. Therefore, I'm also stuck in a place where I am and I cannot find another job.

Are you looking for another job?

Yes, like most of my colleagues.

We will return to this question later. Now, I would kindly ask you to answer this question: What is the local Church and what is the universal Church for you? In your opinion, should the local Church differ from the universal Church?

In my opinion, there should be no difference between the local and universal Church. I believe that the Church is one great community, one big family, in which, because of the 'common good', we all support each other, in accordance with the abilities of each member, as well as receive support. However, there should be privileges, obligations, and duties that are reserved only for priests. They should do what they are empowered to do through the sacrament of Holy Orders. All other members should perform their tasks according to various talents and expertise in the same way as every family functions.

It must be clear who is doing what. Currently, priests are doing everything. They are builders, economists, managers, parish priests, and teachers. Actually, they are in charge of everything. However, they should only be

priests. All the activities in a parish should be conducted by pastoral and economic councils. However, those councils exist only in theory. They have no function. You can see that their members appear only in photos in reports of episcopal visits to a parish or other events. In reality, they do not have any obligations, no duties...

In the last 20-25 years, the Church in this country has become an employer who has employed a significant number of people. You certainly have contact with those who are employed in other Church organizations and you share your experiences. What do you think about the Church as an employer? Are clerics good managers? Are those Church organizations well organized and managed? Are they better employers compared to the government or private organizations and companies? Could they be mentioned as a sample and a role model for other employers in this country?

The Church is actively involved in many areas of human life: preschool, elementary, and high school education, orphanages, nursing homes, healthcare, media, Caritas, working with young people, and culture. The Church's social teaching could certainly be implemented and demonstrated in practice in all the abovementioned activities. However, I can name only one cleric-manager with whom the laymen employees are satisfied and with whom it is pleasure to work. All others cannot be considered model managers as they do not differ much from any other private employer.

Regarding the Church's social teaching, priests quite often preach from the pulpit about the rights of workers. They easily criticize the government and politicians because they do not provide adequate workers' rights or they do not fulfill the promises from election campaigns. However, at the same time, many of the clerics 'prostitute' themselves and sell themselves to those politicians in order to get some economic benefits. That's how they become 'pulpit' spokesmen of political parties during election campaigns.

On the other hand, lay people who are employees in the Church do not have better treatment than other employees in the state. Apart from what I've already mentioned, most workers receive only the national minimum wage. The clerics preach about the importance of family, they emphasize that the birth rates have fallen, that the children are a blessing, but when some of the Church employees became pregnant, they were looking for ways to get rid of them. The law forbids dismissal during pregnancy, but as soon as maternity

leave is over, young mothers get fired.

Once I went out of a church when a priest-manger was talking about workers' rights in his sermon. I know that he pays the minimum wage to his employees, that they have fixed-term contracts for three months, and that they are not paid sick leave. Should we also mention the development and education of employees? There is no such thing.

Quite often, you can hear from clerics-managers: "Let's let everyone go where it is better for them."

Some of my colleagues, out of their naivety or honesty, told their clerics-managers that they went for a job interview somewhere else, and the next day, someone else had a job interview for their position and soon, they were discharged without getting another job.

In fact, there is a lot of hypocrisy. They are preaching one thing but the reality looks very different.

You certainly have a lot of examples for what you're saying?

Yes. A lot.

How many female employees were fired after they got pregnant under the assumption that they were married?

Of course they were married! I have to emphasize that female employees in education are safe. The wages for all employed in schools, including Church schools, are financed from the state budget. Since the ministry of education is *de facto* an employer, the rights of employees are respected. The young mothers are safe there since the law is respected and the state indeed pays their maternity leave and offers other financial support. Problems occur in those organizations that are not funded by the state budget. I know that in Church organizations whose main areas of work include media, preschool education, and charitable activity, young mothers got fired.

I'd like to explain what I have mentioned before that some clerics sell themselves to politicians for small sums of money. Recently, there were elections here, and I was present when one cleric spoke to his fellow cleric. The two were supposed to have lunch that day with two politicians from two different parties and different ethnic groups. The latter said that politicians will require them to promote them, and he suggested that they should accept it. In return, they would demand a donation. That's how things work.

Do you know what they use such donations for? Are they used for the needs of a parish or personal needs?

In my opinion, some of this money is used for specific needs of the parish community. However, I would say that much is invested in buildings, churches, vehicle fleets, and the parish houses that are too often renovated, although there is no real need for such a thing. On the other hand, too little is allocated for the needs of the neediest in the parish. For example, why not buy firewood for those who cannot afford it? Or why can't they build a playground for children? They do not think as much about the parish community as they do about personal comfort and competing with colleagues, for example, about who is going to spend more money on pleasures.

Donations from local political parties are relatively small compared to the donations that come from abroad. The money that comes from abroad is generally not spent for purposes for which it was obtained. However, in order to justify expenses, invoices are forged.

Now you have opened a completely new topic. You are saying that an unknown amount of money from donations has been spent inappropriately and not for the purposes for which it was intended?

Exactly. The money comes from different institutions abroad. Some of them are religious; some are not. Benefactors are contacted either through personal acquaintances or from recommendations. It is important to mention that once contact with a benefactor is established, all information is kept strictly confidential. A priest would reveal that information to his fellow cleric, another institution or parish, only in exceptional cases. However, it will happen only if they - cleric who has contact with a benefactor and the parish priest or head of an organization - are very good friends and if they belong to the same 'camp'.

I didn't mention it so far, but clerics in this local Church are divided into camps, herds, cells, or call it whatever you want. In those groups, they mutually reinforce each other and protect their own material interests and status. Those camps are relatively small. There are maybe 3-7 clerics in one cell. Because they do not say good things about their brothers behind each other's backs, I wouldn't say that it is 'brotherly love' that unites them. They are staying together only out of self-interest.

When the representatives of donors come here, they are welcomed by well-established teams of those ‘camps’ that know where they should take the guests, what has to be shown, and what must be said. I would describe those ‘reception committees’ as groups of well-trained theatre performers. The scenario is usually the same, the scene and choreography as well. The largest part of the donors ‘accept to be deceived’, i.e. they do not care and provide financial support for projects that are partly or fully implemented only on paper, i.e. factitiously.

How do you see yourself in the future in your local Church?

After my personal experiences, I do not consider myself an active member of such institution.

You do not consider yourself a believer, or you do not see yourself as an active member...

What is the difference between a believer and an active member? In my opinion, a believer is someone who actively participates in the life of the Church. Thus a believer is an active member. Since I have been here for a long time, I do not believe that I could participate deliberately in something organized by the Church. As an individual yes, I will be willing to help a neighbor or someone who is in need. But if something is organized either by the parish or diocese, I’m not sure if I could participate because I would constantly ask myself: Is what they are saying and presenting to the public truth or is the truth something completely different?

Do you have any spiritual satisfaction from being part of the Church?

No. Not anymore. I found my spiritual satisfaction in reading the Bible alone and in personal prayer in the morning and in the evening...

Do you want to recommend something to believers and clerics in your local community?

Believers should be aware that their parish priest is there only to provide a temporary service. They have to be concerned about everything that happens in their parish community, in the parish church, parish house, as well as the diocese. The parish belongs to them too and it does not belong to some bully who happens to be their parish priest.

The clerics know that a fish rots from the head first. They should stop

sweeping problems under the rug, there is no more place for all their waste. Slowly but surely, people are starting to notice and understand the proportion of their 'organized crime'. Therefore, they are turning their backs on the Church. They cannot sell the same stories anymore. They have to solve the problems in their ranks urgently. The education and selection of the future priest has to be thoroughly changed. Only if they change, can we expect some improvement. I believe that in such situation, even Jesus himself would turn away his head and left the Church.

Translator's Notes:

- ¹ If an employee does not have a contract, it means that the employer does not pay taxes or social and health insurance for that employee.
- ² The rights of employees with fixed-term contracts as well as the responsibility of their employers are significantly limited as opposed to the employees with permanent contracts.

People were passing by and watching my misery. Some of them spat contemptuously; some turned away and I had not noticed anyone lending me a hand

A Layman Speaks about Structural Difficulties as a Pastoral Parish-Assistant

Interview with Olda, Czech Republic
Interview Held in Czech by Petr Jandejsek
Translated into English by Michaela Jandejsková

Key words: traditional Christianity, playing a role vs. witnessing, theological studies, 'priestly' promises, laymen as pastoral assistants, laymen as 'Church servants', wages for laymen, stress

Olda, first of all, let me ask you about your childhood and youth. Do you come from a Christian family or did you become a Christian later?

The family I was born into was traditionally Christian, which meant that we visited Sunday service every week. And that was it – the core of Christian practice in our family. So, I was used to going to church and to believing. I went to religion classes as well. Sometimes, I was the only one at our elementary school. It has been a long time since then, so it is difficult for me to go into particulars.

Was there any Christian youth group in the region?

Yes, there was. One was in the parish in a nearby town. It was organized by a local priest. So, I either went there or to another one in the town, which was not far away.

You decided to study Theology and you entered a seminary to become a priest. Was your decision inspired by your experience

in the Christian youth group? I suppose your family background would not have led you to such a decision?

Yes, you are right. The decision was based on my experience of Christian life in the youth community. I went to the seminary to study Theology. But I did not finish the priestly formation in the seminary. I did not have enough strength to do it. I was not fit enough for such demanding studies, especially when I went there already after I finished compulsory military service. I could not do it.

But you finished the school successfully?

Yes, I completed my master degree in Theology.

But nonetheless, you still wanted to serve in the Church, not as a priest but as a pastoral assistant at that time.

Yes, I did.

Can you remember your motivation for such service?

It was partly due to some force of habit. And I felt the need for such service. It seemed to me that people should serve in the Church in this way, especially when they studied Theology or wanted to do such work. I thought that it was important.

Were you able to imagine how this work would register with the needs of your family?

My decision was made out of enthusiasm. There was also what I would call youthful thoughtlessness involved in it. And idealism, of course. Some people tend to be idealists until they are thirty or so. But it was the harsh reality, which prevailed in the course of time.

So, for how long did you work as a pastoral assistant?

Our family lived in a small town in southern Bohemia for exactly four years.

How did you get to this place? I know you come from a different part of the country.

The story actually began when I was offered to study in the seminary for the diocese of České Budějovice. The reason was that the diocese had the

smallest number of seminarians in the whole country. I thought that I was most needed there and therefore, I went to the seminary as a representative of southern Bohemia. And then when I was looking for work, it was the force of habit again that led us to a place in this diocese. My boss was a friend of mine from the seminary who was a year older. He 'prepared' a flat for us, which in fact was not suitable for living. Promises, promises. Even if it is a priestly promise. We moved in after six months of intensive reconstruction. We had to redo the walls, etc. This was the first harsh experience. We led a Spartan life there.

You already had a child then, didn't you?

Yes, we had one child and there was another one on the way. When we were leaving the service after four years, we had three children and we were expecting the fourth one, but I am not sure if we knew it at that time.

How did your service for the Church end? Why did you leave?

It ended slowly but intensively. It was getting worse and worse over the last six months and finally, it was impossible for us to stay.

Can you describe your difficulties in more detail?

I would describe it as a clash of civilizations – Czech on the one hand and Polish on the other. The Polish civilization was represented by a Polish priest, an eager missionary, an oblate – a monk. His expectations about the service were that we would walk to Champs Elysees once a month, that we would travel around Europe. I was not able to meet such expectations. It was impossible for me, taking into account my monthly income, which amounted to 5,000 CZK then.¹

I do not want to go into detail. We did not get on well with one another. And there we stood – one against the other. He was a priest endowed with holy ordination and me, a layman not endowed with holy ordination. The bishop stood before an obviously easy decision whose side to take.

You mentioned your wage. It must not have been easy to live on such a low income with the whole family.

It was not easy. Later, my employer tried to solve this problem after we had protested. But I gathered from their attitude that they were not much interested in our wellbeing.

So, you lacked support from your superior in the diocese, i.e. the bishop to do your work, didn't you?

It seemed to me that our prelates lived in a different world. They were interested in other things. They did not get involved in such matters.

The situation finally got so bad that you decided to leave the service?

It was simply a conflict with my boss as our lifestyles differed. We had to be careful with our expenses and to lead a modest life. I mowed grass, I dug trenches, and I ministered a service from time to time. All in all, I led an ordinary life whereas the Polish priest came from a region where 'Church servants' belonged to a higher social status. Physical work was something they would never do or at least it seemed to me to be the case. I saw a Czech priest dig the trench around the vicarage. He considered it to be a sports activity and something that could get him closer to his neighbors. With the Polish priest, it was absolutely different.

I do not want to judge it, whether it was good or bad. I leave judging to someone who is wiser than me. I have mentioned it only to illustrate why it was impossible to get on well with one another. There were more differences and from time to time, some arguments occurred. So, it logically ended up in our leaving the service.

Did the various sides of the conflict make efforts to overcome the conflict and to continue working together?

This I cannot remember now. On the whole, we were decent people, not liars, or the like. I really think that it was a cultural clash, which demonstrated itself in us having a different attitude towards the service in the parish. And our attitudes differed to such a degree that it was impossible to harmonize them. I am actually not able to figure out why it happened. I do not think that it can be described as a conflict between a good and bad man. There was no ill will. It simply happened.

When you serve as a 'professional' in the Church, others expect you to give a good example of faith. This must be demanding. What was your experience?

I don't exactly know what to say. It is demanding, of course. You have to watch your behavior more carefully. On the other hand, a man is a man and it is not possible to avoid every sin. You still are a rather weak human being.

When you become a councilman, people watch you more closely. You have to live with it as well. You are watched more closely. That is all.

You should remain authentic and not only play your role. Is that what you are saying?

Actually, you have your role. You wanted a role so you are given one, and it is up to you to grow into the role. That is what is going on. Or do you suspect me of having used bad language at home and when I closed the front door I started to speak politely? Or do you think I had the expression of St. John on my face on the bridge in Prague? I am not sure whether I understand the question.

When you are expected to talk about your faith, help others with their faith, what can happen to your personal faith? Especially, when you should not show any doubts? But, of course, as you say, you can express your doubts. We are merely people.

When you want to do something, you should have some competence in it, according to the judgement of others as well as your own. When you lack the abilities for your work or you lose them, you should quit. Of course, some probationary period is acceptable. But when you think that it is no good or that you cannot pull yourself together, you should leave your job. I am convinced that this is the only good solution for the situation. To pretend something, to behave differently in public and at home, does not make sense.

When I came to work as a pastoral assistant in that place, I had such an attitude that I put myself in one group with the others – I knew that we were all sinners. I said: “I have come to serve and we can work together, not only are you sinners but I am no paragon of virtue. Let’s work together; we are all on the same level. I offer you something and if you want, we can organize a morning meditation in the nearby quarry, for example. On Sunday, we can get up at four in the morning, go there, watch the sunrise and read something from the Bible, for instance. Then, we can spend an hour or an hour and a half in meditation together.”

So, you think that it is good to do everything together.

Yes, exactly. We went canoeing, hiking, or on vacation with the children. Someone always helped us to organize it.

When you left your position as a pastoral assistant, your family

went with you. You changed your work and home. Did you consider it to be only a negative thing or was there anything positive in it as well?

I think that it was altogether a positive step. Firstly, the job had no good prospects for my family and me. To be honest, it meant struggling along on a small income for the rest of our lives, and living in a rented flat on top of all that. It was no good for the family in the long-term view. It would only bring us to rack and ruin. I think that the conflict was inevitable. If it had not arisen at that time, it would have appeared later. And in that case, I am not sure whether I would be able to pull through it. I would end up on the scrap heap anyway, penniless, with small children, and without any job prospects. That is what it felt like after I had been sacked.

And of course, people were passing by and watching my misery. Some of them spat contemptuously, some turned away, and I had not noticed anyone lending me a hand, to be honest.

So, it was a relief for you in the end, to leave the job?

First of all, it was tough. That is what it felt like. But I think that it had its significance from a practical point of view. As regards to finances, we stand on our own two legs now; the children are provided for; they can study and we live somewhere. That is what I find important these days.

Now, when you remember the time you and your family spent in southern Bohemia, do you recall it with nostalgia or with negative feelings?

Mainly with nostalgia, the negative feelings faded away somehow. It was a nice place to live; the people were good; we did some good work. All in all, those were good years. I remember it fondly. It is the same with my wife and children, as far as they can remember, of course.

After leaving your job, you had to struggle for your existence?

Yes. We lived at my mother-in-law's place for two years, which I considered to be a purgatory or temporary punishment, or both. Then we got this flat and started to pay it back. We are building a house now. There is no reason to complain.

And you set up your business.

No business. That is too grand of a word. A trade, I am still solely a trader. I had to learn the trade a bit. So I retrained and I learned on the go: Here, I had to ask how to do something, there, I had a look as to how it was done; I had to figure out something, etc. It was about jumping into deep water and seeing whether one could swim or not. And we are still on the surface now.

How has your leaving the Church service influenced your faith and motivation in leading a Christian lifestyle, including the upbringing of your children?

I doubt that someone who has not gone through such an ordeal could imagine our difficulties. To say it in a secular way, we were sacked. We were thrown onto the scrap heap, without money, a place to live, or a profession to earn our living. So my trust in the institutional Church was at its lowest point. It was impossible to go to another diocese because there was nothing I could offer any more. Whoever has gone through such misery can probably imagine what a ‘wonderful’ thing it is, especially when it happened in connection with the Church, with the Church representatives. It is nothing enjoyable from the point of view of your faith and Christian life. I do not know how to describe it more accurately. Personally, it was very unpleasant. I experienced it as a tough and unpleasant situation taking into account the economic as well as spiritual aspect.

Can one take it as a test of their faith? Is it possible to find some spiritual meaning in it?

First and foremost, you have to get over it a bit. I found some tables somewhere that compared stress levels in various situations of your life. And according to these tables, I should have totally broken down. Fortunately, it did not happen. There is no time to muse over your situation when you have to provide for your family; you need money to buy some bread and other things. Moreover, it is even worse when you have to find some profession. I did mountain climbing when I was young. So, there was a possibility to do some roof maintenance but there was not much I could offer. I was a trained agricultural mechanic but at that time, Czech agriculture was in such a bad state that it was not possible to find work there. I was given some offers, to teach for instance. I would have earned 7,000 CZK per month.² It meant commuting every day and the salary was so small that it would not pay off, taking into account the cost of commuting. I had to provide for my family and my work had to be financially reasonable. I think that a chap who has a family cannot afford such luxury as to have a job that he likes. At that time, I

was prepared to become a digger if it proved to be necessary.

Let us go back to the original topic. I have a concrete question for you. After such a harsh experience, was it okay for you to go to church next Sunday?

From my childhood, I was used to going to church regularly although I did not experience any deep feelings for it. I considered it my duty. Today, taking part in Sunday service is something I feel that I am obliged to do for God. After studying Theology, faith in God for me is a given. It is a natural thing, I would say. I am not able to question it; it is impossible. Now, the thing is how to face it. There are bad things and there are good things happening in one's life. To what extent He wants them to happen or lets them happen, I cannot say. I am not interested in finding out whether they have any meaning. What I am trying to do is to survive the bad events. It is a task for theologians to look for their meaning. When you have money and time, you can dedicate yourself to solving such riddles.

Does your experience influence the way you bring your children up as well? Do you let your children enjoy more freedom as regards to faith? Or as a father, have you got a rather solid opinion of what is good in this area?

I do not hide, not even at home, that with regards to faith, I take good common sense as the key criterion. Moreover, I think that a man is a weak and sinful creature, regardless of who he is. A man is a man and it does not make any difference whether he is wearing a pointed hat, shorts, stripes, or has braided hair. It is all the same; a man who is prone to error, pride, and all sorts of sin. I do not believe someone would have a patent on absolute truth.

So, do you mean that a formal religious belonging does not guarantee one to be a good person?

A man is a man and you should not take him too seriously, regardless of the fact of him being the pope, a bishop, a priest, a deacon, or a beggar. You should not take anyone so seriously and this can be applied to every doctrine as well. Otherwise, we and Mohammedans would have killed one another a long time ago. This has not obviously happened yet. And therefore I conclude that there are people who share my views on this matter. One should use common sense. If God let it be as it is, one should put up with the situation and tolerate it.

Finally, I would like to ask whether you think there is a place in the Church for pastoral assistants. And if so, what should be changed in order to prepare a place for them?

I do not think the model we had tried is a good one. At least here, in the Czech Republic, it is mainly a matter of finance and economics. This should be a starting point or a basis for further development. When a parish financially stands on its own two legs and is rich enough to pay the people it needs well, it is great. But it has to be based on natural, economical grounds. Someone once said: The supernatural presupposes the natural. Here it is clear to me: Economics and employment contracts in the first place and on this basis, you can build pastoral service. It is necessary that relationships are based on human and social principles.

On the other hand, it is most acceptable to involve volunteers. Especially retired people can do volunteering as they have more spare time for such work, compared, for example, to parents of small children. When a priest in the parish is able to accept such help and is able to integrate it into the life of the parish, it is a good thing, indeed. But not every priest is like this. The parish in the nearby town is a good example of such a practice. But the truth is I have seen it only from the outside. I do not know what it looks like from the inside.

Translator's Notes:

¹ About 140 EUR.

² About 250 EUR.

I hope that one day the person will be more important in the Church than the administration

A Lay Theologian Writes about Her Painful Experience and Inner Conflict while Working for the Local Church

Essay Written by Noemi, Romania
Translated from Hungarian into English
by Hajnalka Tamas

Key words: traditional way of life, community, identity, religious teacher, catechist, working within the Church, style of communication within the Church

“Do I find an appropriate place for myself in the Church?”

My first thought is definitely ‘NO’! In the present circumstances, I feel that I do not have a place in the local Church and I cannot be her true and active member. I am simply not allowed to do so. The problem is that I cannot – and, as a matter of fact, I don’t even want to – be a ‘dumb sheep’ that goes where she is told, without thinking, without asking, even when her conscience suggests that this is not the right track.

How did I get here?

I was raised in a traditionally religious village, where the neighbors, even today, comment if somebody doesn’t attend Mass on Sunday. In spite of the fact that my parents live in a mixed marriage, I received a religious upbringing. My grandmother and my uncle who is a priest played a significant role in it. During my childhood, going to Mass even on weekdays was normal. The parish was my second home. At the age of ten, I already started to sing in the youth choir. Back then, the fact that I could be a member of a small community filled me with joy. The community helped me to know myself and to learn how to relate to fellow human beings. The community became so important for me that I decided to continue my education at a Catholic high school. My older peers singing in the youth choir spoke about this school

with such a great joy.

Following successful admission, I took part in a summer youth meeting. This event changed my life. Up until then, going to church was a bit of a habit for me. I attended the youth choir because it was fun and the company was good. After this meeting, however, my relationship with God became much more important for me. Under the influence of the lectures that I listened to at the meeting, the small group talks, and especially the sacrament of Confession there, my religiosity and spirituality were transformed. From then on, I went to Mass every Sunday not because the neighbors would have been scandalized if I didn't go, but because I considered it important to meet God and the community and to celebrate together. My prayer life, too, was no longer a series of gabbled prayers, but I started to lay down my thoughts and feelings in front of God. I strived to pay attention to His words, and occasionally to give thanks, apart from just making a great number of youthful requests and wishes.

The community life that I experienced in high school, during weekend spiritual retreats held every semester, monthly adorations of the Blessed Sacrament, the common prayer organized every day in the college, and the talks that I had with my spiritual director, they all fostered the deepening of my spirituality and my relationship with God.

After my high school graduation, I decided that I wanted to study to become a religion teacher. For that reason, I enrolled in Theology. At the university, while getting to know the Faculty of Theology and Letters, I learnt again how important the community is. At the Faculty of Theology, I found a true community, where I faced not only high expectations from professors, but also saw their willingness to help and their openness for dialogue. I could address my questions to most of my professors and tell them my opinion and they would always respond to them. They expressed their points of view, which helped me to broaden my horizon. I knew from their answers that they had been listening attentively to what had been said. I felt like they took me seriously, in spite of my youth and, thinking back, in many cases, in spite of my superficial knowledge of a topic.

At the end of my theoretical and practical studies, I started to work for the local Church. My task was to organize various educational and community-building programs. For a short time, I felt very good doing what I was doing. I felt like I had found my place in life and that I could do what was important for me, as my conscience dictated. I did my very best to spread the joy of the Gospel to as many people as possible as I wanted their religious practice to

become a conscious one. I seized every opportunity to help those in my surroundings to develop a personal relationship with God. While striving to carry out my work, I devoted myself to prayer knowing that only in this way I could successfully witness how important it is in one's life to have a relationship with God.

However, in the past years, the situation changed. I had to painfully experience that one could get slaps even from people within the Church. The fact that the clergy can lie to my face and reject other people merely in order to acquire material goods is in no way compatible with my view of the Church. And, unfortunately, I had to come across these in the administrative circles within the Church. This hurt a lot and it still hurts. This experience brought about a crisis in my spiritual life as well as in my relationship with God.

The question 'why' was the sole topic of my prayers for a long time. I still don't know the answer to this question, but now at least I can leave this unanswered question aside. I managed to come to the realization that my problems do not relate to God since I owe Him so much. They do not concern the Church either because for me the Church continues to represent a community that helps people to develop a relationship with God.

For me, the biggest problems in the local Church are the mistrust and style of internal communication. It bothers me when I cannot tell the clergy what kind of problems I can see. It bothers me when they want to compel me to do something what is according to my conscience wrong. It bothers me that in the very Church which I consider to be the most important community of my life, I had to experience what it means to be rejected. If I do not agree with something, I am openly told to stay away. However, if I adapt to what is asked, and if it is against my understanding of what is good, then I would get into an inner conflict.

On the one hand, I still believe that God endowed every person with reason and free will. He called us all to eternal life, so it is everyone's responsibility to develop his or her conscience and to do good by acting according to his or her conscience. On the other hand, I feel like I am expected by the Church to do what I am told just like a 'dumb sheep'. Not only do I remain without answers to my questions and my opinion is not even acknowledged, but I am punished even for the fact that I dared to say it out loud in inner circles. I often felt like Balaam's donkey. I could not say, I could not do what my conscience dictated, because the feedback that I received was always simple: "A layperson shouldn't do such a thing! Just do your job; don't

step in; don't think! Do what we say!" – More exactly, what "we think". Only God knows the last time that I received a word of encouragement and motivation. I experienced that I cannot feel at home in the Church in every situation. Since I cannot say my opinion, I conclude that I am not accepted by the Church, i.e. I am not Her member.

This poses really great troubles for me in my everyday life since I cannot tell anyone about my problems. Was I to tell any of my acquaintances about the pain I experienced from the Church administration; it could potentially shake their faith as well and they might experience a crisis of faith as a consequence. I cannot speak openly about my situation in such a way that the mistrust within the Church does not become obvious for any reasonable person. I cannot and I do not want to take responsibility for this. Thus, I speak of my problems only when I believe that it is possible. I still give thanks to God for He is still helping me to discover, in spite of all this, the good in the Church. I give thanks that my spiritual director and the regular weekly community prayer helped me to get over the hard times. I believe again with the greatest confidence that God loves me and accepts me as I am. He stands by me so I make the best of this situation. Sometimes, I would really want God to tell me frankly what to do with my life, what work to undertake from now on, where to find a job, where I could meet people who experience their Christianity in an authentic way and who show openness for dialogue, a job which wouldn't be simply for money, but which would also enable the witnessing of my faith.

I feel that I am small when I am alone. In theory, I know very well that my duty is simply to live my Christianity in an authentic way, but it bothers me a lot to see the mistrust around me, about which I can do nothing. I perceive it as a failure that even after several years of trying I was not able to correct the communication style of the local Church. It hurts me to see that I am not the only one to suffer because of this, and there are things which cannot be changed at all.

Occasionally, I attend meetings which pull me out of my sorrow. I can then meet in town with the people that make it possible to experience the true beauty of the community within the Church. I give thanks for the occasional friendly e-mails of encouragement, for the attentiveness I receive from those people who suffer just like me. This gives me hope and strength.

I hope that one day a person will be more important in the Church than the administration. I hope that one day adherence to traditions will not be equated with staying still, with fossilization, but that tradition will be the basis

of life and it will help mediate values. I hope that I will be able to live up to that moment when equal attention to the signs of the times and the loyalty to the Gospel will truly prevail in the Church. I hope that I will be able to meet more Christians whose authenticity can grasp me, give me impetus, and inspire me so that I can inspire myself.

If I ask myself again, “Do I find an appropriate place for myself in the Church?”, my answer is no longer that explicit. The situation is not at all ideal, that’s a fact. I have problems with the Church. There are things because of which it is very difficult for me to live at the present moment within the Church. In spite of all this, I do not think the situation is completely hopeless. Apart from many negatives about the Church administration and hierarchy, there are indeed good things in the Church. This is why I endeavor to pay more attention to this, and to do every conceivable thing so that as many people as possible can experience the beauty and joy of the community and of having a relationship with God.

Lack of mutual trust makes the relationship between clerics and laymen difficult

A Catechist Narrates about His Experience Working with Clerics

Essay Written by Filip, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Translated from Croatian into English by Marijo Vukoja

Key words: tradition, post-war environment, rosary prayer, catechist, victim of 'formal' cultural Christianity, spiritual development, the role of lay persons in the Church, clerics, being 'watched', conflict with parish priest

I grew up in a traditional Christian environment where people's understanding of faith, God, and the Church meant merely attending Sunday Mass, going to Confessions on Easter and on Christmas, and cultivating the Christian tradition. One could say that the form, i.e. the visual manifestation and appearances, were more important than the faith content.

As a boy, I attended the parish Sunday school and went to church every Sunday. I have to admit that as a boy I was particularly thrilled by Jesus' parables. I often learned them by heart and knew almost all of them. I believe that it was my first personal encounter with faith. What fascinated me most at that time, and I still think it is the central point of Christianity, was the message of the Good News about the salvation of all men, about righteousness, justice, and the love of the Creator for all. For me, the Gospel became a great discovery - a perfect description of how life should be. Also, today, I experience such a unique experience in my life.

During my time in high school, I learnt a lot about the destiny of minority ethnic groups in a post-war city. As the war broke out, we had to abandon our homes and places where our forefathers had lived for centuries.

After high school, I headed off to college. The story of my enrollment to

college is so extraordinary that even today I wonder how I managed to get to where I am.

After the war, my family prayed the rosary every night. I am not too sure how I comprehended the meaning of the rosary at that time as even today I do not know if I am able to understand it fully. However, I am deeply convinced that the prayers of the rosary can work miracles. A miracle must be the only explanation of how I managed to get enrolled at the Theology Faculty. To be honest, I had no intention of taking theological studies; I had no such ambitions nor did I possess the necessary knowledge for such studies.

Without me noticing it, the studies for laymen catechists transformed my life. Initially, I just tried to obtain basic knowledge, similar to that of my fellow students. However, I can say with confidence that I discovered myself there as I found a place where I felt accepted. My personality was shaped by my presence there.

Throughout my study years, I was fascinated by theology and philosophy. Although my knowledge of these two disciplines was fairly superficial, I felt inspired to progress and develop. Even today, I feel the enthusiasm of that time when I was discovering new knowledge that had been 'hidden' for years and then it suddenly got revealed to me. I have always respected and admired the ingenuity of theologians and philosophers. In my opinion, the simplicity of that ingenuity was actually the reason why it was hidden.

Some of my professors deeply influenced the foundations of my faith and helped me to overcome and to understand the problems of my youthful days. A person who made a great impact and influenced my development was Anthony de Mello, S.J., whose writings were truly great discoveries for me and they offered me help in my everyday life. Mello affected my whole being and helped me to form opinions about human relationships, the understanding of God, and the formation of my spiritual life. His spirituality and simplicity and his unmasking of the social conditions significantly affected the quality of my life. Perhaps one of the biggest breakthroughs in my life was when I realized that there is no perfection in this world and that every man is vulnerable and requires empathy from others. Only when I stopped looking for perfection in people did I realize that I was looking for something that I could never find.

Spirituality has become the basis of my personal development. Religion was necessary; however, in my opinion, it is not a prerequisite for personal

spiritual development. During the first years of my studies, I was a victim of my own learned personal religious forms and modes of behavior. They made me fearful and as a result, I maintained the wrong perception of God. Above all, the wrong images of God and my ideas about Church worship were the obstacles to my spiritual development. It took me some time to get rid of them and to overcome other anxieties they had caused. Today, I often repeat to my students that religion has to be useful, otherwise something is wrong and one has to change something in their life.

Bearing in mind that I have worked as a catechist for the last ten years I'll try to give an answer to the question whether there is a place for me in the Church. First of all, I am aware that the Church plays a very important role in my life and in the shaping of my religious, spiritual, intellectual, and human development. Therefore, I believe that each of us has a place in the Church.

However, I have noticed that in local communities there are some issues that might be stumbling blocks and I believe it is the matter of the role of laymen in the Church. It is not defined and therefore often depends on the individual interpretation and attitude of clerics.

The attitude of the Church hierarchy towards the laity is very individualized, i.e. it seems that there is no universal acceptance and wish for cooperation. I think that the Church lacks trust in laymen. Very often, the exact role of the laity in the life of the parish community is not defined. As I said, the attitude towards the laity is to a great extent the expression of personal convictions of members of the hierarchy rather than a universal approach and awareness of the importance, tasks, or meeting the needs of the laity in the Church.

I personally found myself in conflict situations with the hierarchy and there were situations when I was being 'watched' by them. Perhaps, out of fear, they do not allow greater involvement of the laity in the life and ordinary issues of the local Church. In my opinion, lay people, i.e. believers, shall be the major force of the Church in modern times. The laymen should play a much more significant role in the local parish community. The attitudes of distrust and fear of the laity should be transformed into the culture of working together in the Lord's field, especially because the hierarchy and laymen have the same task: To live out and to proclaim the Good News. In my opinion, modern times are going to bring some changes in the Church in which the place of the laity in the Church will become more significant.

Another thought that comes to my mind is the need of changing the

perception of the Church hierarchy. When I ask the youth why they do not attend Sunday Mass the answer is almost always the same. Today's youth are very well aware of the situation in the Church. They are critically observing Her representatives, i.e. clergy, and resent their aspiration of having an easy life. For many of them, it is evident that the Church has become a part of this world and has fallen into the trap of conformity.

But are the representatives of the Church, members of the hierarchy, and active laymen indeed true witnesses of faith? It is difficult to give an answer to this question since it is the personal testimony of faith that attracts or repels believers. Being a witness is surely the main task of all believers in the Church and there is no better way of proclaiming the Gospel.

Very often, it seems that we exist in some kind of third reality

A Nun Speaks about the Underprivileged Position of Women Religious

Interview with Olha, Ukraine
Interview Held in Ukrainian and Translated into English
by Viktor Poletko

Key words: female monasticism, discrimination, exploitation, hierarchy

How is the mission of female monasticism defined in Eastern Churches, particularly in Ukraine? Does it depend on a particular congregation? If yes, what is it specifically for your congregation?

The mission, of course, depends on the congregation. In Ukraine, there are more than ten such congregations. Each of them was founded as a means to satisfy a specific demand of the Church.

The specific mission of our congregation has three dimensions. First of all, it is the education of preschool children, the education of girls, and other groups. The second dimension is medical care. Before WWI, there were no qualified medical workers in Ukrainian villages and small towns so our nuns provided early treatment; they prepared medication; they helped during the outbreaks of typhus and cholera. The third dimension of our mission is serving in churches. That means cleaning, washing, sewing, and embroidering sacerdotal vestments, or in other words, providing all necessary related liturgical services.

Do you feel a harmony between what you are supposed to do and what you do in reality?

Of course there are difficulties, but in general, if you ask me about the

mission, my private opinion about it is that it must be reevaluated in contemporary times and new aims must be defined.

The reason is that the contemporary world has changed a lot. Social work which was previously provided by our congregation has now been taken over by some state institutions. As a result, our congregation is doing the same work as some state institutions. Sometimes, there are also conflicts because the ideas and values which are encouraged by religious institutions often differ from the values cherished in state institutions. I don't know, maybe the reason is the separation between Church and State; or maybe, because the Church and state institutions are very alienated from each other. As a result, our congregation lives as a parallel reality, not only within the state but also within the Church.

There are no clear aims defined for female monasticism in general and our congregation in particular. Therefore, it happens that we exist in the Church, but we do not know how the Church views us, what bishops expect from us, what they can offer us. Very often, it seems that we exist in some kind of third reality, relying only upon ourselves.

Let me give you an example from just one dimension of our mission. We want to work with preschool children but we are not allowed to do so because we are a religious community. The main argument for that is the separation of the Church from the State.

If we want to found a private kindergarten, we face material and juridical difficulties, which we are unable to overcome. But we just want to accomplish our mission! We want to share with children every good thing that we have; we want to educate them in God's light... Maybe not only in God's light, but also in a human one, because human dignity is cherished in religious institutions, which is not always the case in state institutions. And the Church doesn't help us much. There are no Church initiatives to build or reconstruct, let us say, a kindergarten, and to provide it with all material necessities so that we can just work there and educate children... We have to be lawyers, economists, housekeepers, and so on; to do everything by ourselves – and only then can we admit and educate these children. It is very difficult.

I would not say that there is harmony in it. I personally want to work in this direction because working with children is something elaborated by our founders and something particular to our mission. There is still need for education of children, but in these new circumstances, we cannot realize it.

Can you say that the episcopacy ignores you as well?

They have some proposals for us but these proposals do not correspond to our mission. For example, they invite our nuns to work in the bishop's residence. To work in a bishop's residence presupposes washing, cleaning up, or answering the phone. Some of our nuns had such experiences. They spent days and nights there, 24/7. You do not have any opportunity to go out and leave the residence. Many nuns have health problems; they need time for resting, for some cultural development, or health care. However, it becomes impossible because they are almost tied to the bishop's residence.

Nuns are treated as housewives. Bishops often consider the work in the kitchen to be easy, as if there is nothing to do there, and as if nuns don't need any assistance there or someone to replace them from time to time. Also, when it comes to the question of a salary, nuns' earnings are disgraceful.

If a nun leaves such a job, a lay woman is employed on totally different conditions. She gets weekends off, holiday allowance, and gets higher salaries. The women who work there tell us all of this. For us, this is an unfair situation because we are simply exploited. It is very disrespectful towards the very dignity of nuns.

Of course, nuns work better because they execute orders carefully, they work devotedly, they can work a whole day if necessary, cooking the best dishes, cleaning, and giving old things a new life and shine with their cleaning. But the hard work provided by nuns is not valued enough.

It's not surprising that nuns fulfill their tasks so carefully, but, indeed, the attitude towards them seems to be 'utilitarian'. Does it have a certain influence on their moral and spiritual well-being, their attitude towards religious life?

Of course it has an influence. That's why we often refuse such job offers. By the way, the youngest generation of our sisters seems to be very different. More than older ones, they try to defend themselves and their position, and they support each other. This is why we face significant resistance; we are criticized and we are called 'bad nuns'.

Our superiors are sometimes asked to send another sister for a certain job since, for instance, a bishop is not satisfied with a sister who disagrees with him or contradicts him. Older sisters are more patient; they try to overcome problems. This obviously happens on the moral or psychological level. It's problematic because if a sister is not capable of defending herself against a

bishop or a priest, then she 'brings' her negative emotions and feelings back home and this causes numerous conflicts within our convents.

It seems that this confrontation is caused by the fact that monks and male clergy in general have an opportunity to become priests or bishops, occupy good positions, participate actively in the public sphere, etc., and not care about the 'practical' aspects of life. On the contrary, nuns are to a large extent deprived of these opportunities. Is it a kind of 'marginalization' of female monasticism?

I cannot say that female monasticism is deprived of all opportunities for professional and intellectual development. Our superiors try to help nuns to study. Most of our sisters obtained their graduate degrees before joining the congregation. Those who didn't are enabled to study, to further their education. Thus, almost all our sisters have university degrees. The common majors are medicine, psychology, pedagogy, etc. Many sisters write post-graduate dissertations abroad as well. Therefore, our congregation takes care of the personal development of nuns. However, it often happens that after the completion of their studies sisters are not able to find a job to implement their knowledge and skills. If, for instance, a sister and any layman apply for the same position in Theology, the advantage will certainly not be given to a nun even if she has a better CV.

There is a kind of discrimination?

Yes.

Did you face this? Could you give some examples?

We have a nun who has just finished her doctoral dissertation at a very good university. She applied for a post-doctoral position, but she wasn't accepted although she met the faculty's criteria much better than other applicants. Their explanation was: "This job is not for a nun".

Does the Christian tradition in its different forms and expressions provide you with any means that help you to fulfill both your authentic charisma and your everyday duties?

What do you mean by Christian tradition?

...liturgical life, Holy Scripture, or patristic texts...

I would say that the monastic community might be a source of this kind of energy for us. I usually work in parish churches. I often get tired and I have my problems. It is very important for me to know that I have a home, that there are other sisters who live the same life. I know that when I come back home they will understand and support me. They do not ask me anything if they see that I am angry. Sometimes, especially when I had an argument with somebody or a conflict with a priest, I do not want to talk. Sisters understand me; they don't ask too many questions; they change the topic, share the stories of how they spent that day, etc. This atmosphere helps me to find meaning in my way of life, to understand why I made this decision to become a nun. The community is really helpful in this regard.

It is also very important to have my private space and time for myself. Our communal life and our schedule is very helpful. I have my own cell, a space where I can be alone, reflect, pray, read something, talk to my friends, etc. It is very important to know that I have my own space where just God and I are present and nobody deprives me of this. Also, when it is difficult, I always look for a chance to travel a little bit, to visit a museum, to meet new people.

Concerning Christian tradition, I believe that Holy Scripture has the answers to all questions. Whenever I open the Scripture, on any page, I find a sentence or a story or an event that helps me to find the answer that I need. Also, this everyday reading of the Holy Scripture reminds me of a day when I have met nuns for the first time in my life many years ago and this was a very deep experience. And this is the most valuable resource that 'recharges' me... Of course, liturgical services are also important... But the private time and space and the Bible are most helpful here.

My time has still not come

A Seminarian Reflects on Inner Church Dynamics and Possibilities for Reform

Interview with Damir, Croatia
Interview Held in Croatian and Translated into English
by Stipe Odak

Key words: seminarian, reform, Pope Francis, double life, inner struggle, authoritarianism, communism

Damir, to begin with, please tell me something about yourself and how your relationship with the Church has changed over time.

I was born in a very tolerant and pluralistic place, or I can at least say that it was more tolerant and pluralistic than the majority of other places in my country. I was raised in the Catholic spirit and from my childhood, I felt a certain discrepancy between my Catholic education and the environment in which I lived.

When I look back, I can see that the roots of the situation in which I find myself in right now are very deep. I can say for myself that I am not a convert in a classical sense of the word. There was not one specific moment in my life in which I decided to belong to the Church and to God. That was more a matter of a natural development. My family is traditionally Catholic, and since my childhood, I went to church weekly, sometimes even more frequently. For me, that was something normal although I was one of the few among my friends who did so.

Upon finishing my high school education, I started to think about my future vocation, and thoughts about priesthood and monastic life at that point did not come as something very relevant to me. For that reason, I was

enrolled in a secular faculty, which I finished and, after that, I worked for several years in my profession. However, during my study, and even more during those years of my work, I came to the conclusion that a life that is dedicated to something greater, to higher ideals, to serving God and fellow humans, is something that would suit my personality better.

I am a monk at the moment, and I have already made religious vows in my order. Currently, I am studying and waiting for my priestly ordination. Regarding the theme of this interview, i.e. regarding my belonging to the Church and emotions that such a topic evokes, I can say that negative feelings are primarily due to the fact that the Church in my country is pretty much occupied with the issues that, in my opinion, lack evangelical foundations, such as the issue of nationhood, ideological belonging, homosexuality, etc.

Recently, Pope Francis said that the Church should not be too much obsessed with those issues, but I am afraid that the Church in my country is. Negative emotions in me are awoken by the fact that, practically speaking, there is an ideological war being fought in which topics of secondary importance, which lack a direct connection with the Gospel, are constantly resurfacing.

How would you describe the attitude of your immediate surrounding towards those topics, and your situation therein?

I live in such an environment in which I would suffer bullying and direct expulsion from my order if I explicitly expressed the attitude that is not in accordance with the mainstream opinion of the clerics in my country. That is because the opinions that I have are seen as neither orthodox nor as something that should be expressed in the name of the Church.

Because of that, I am forced to hide my true feelings, my true attitudes, and to adapt to the majority opinion; actually, not to the majority, but to the attitude that is shared by most of the members of my community, and most of the clergy where I will also belong one day.

Does it seem to you that clergy and your monastic community actually share those attitudes? Or perhaps people who have similar thoughts to yours and who are different from the 'mainstream' are afraid to express their attitudes publicly?

My experience somehow tells me that there are not so many people in the Church who share my views. There are two reasons for this. First, the Church

system operates in such a way that those who think in such a way are being expelled by default; and second, such persons who think differently do not want to join the clergy by becoming priests or monks.

I often ask myself why I entered the Church in such a way that I became immediately connected with Her very core, i.e. Her hierarchy. Although, it could be debated in what measure a hierarchical church is truly the Church. I simply find the answer to this question in the fact that my mentality, my belief, all that I carry inside, desires that vocation, and that God wants me here. I feel that God wants me to live a fully dedicated life and I came across no other obstacles on that way – neither in celibacy nor in any other monastic rule – nowhere besides that ideological part where I constantly face problems because of the aforementioned reasons.

How would you describe your core beliefs and attitudes in light of European and world theological movements that took place in the last 50-60 years? Can you connect yourself with those tendencies?

I feel very close to the attitudes expressed in the theology of the Second Vatican Council or, better to say, to the spirit of the Council's theology. I feel attached to the paradigm that was born there, to theologians and modes of thought that do not exclude themselves from the context in which they live but rather, they try to adapt the Christian message to their own time. That is, I believe in what the first Christians, starting with St. Paul, actually did all the time. They tried to adapt Jesus' original message to the context they were set in. Thus, I hold that we have to adapt that same message to our own context, and all theologies that attempt to do so are congenial to me.

Unfortunately, it seems to me that the theological attitude that prevails in the Church in my country is the one which claims that it is necessary to resist that spirit of time which, I am afraid, leads to alienation of the majority of believers and transforms the Church into an exclusive sect that does not accept those who do not share Her opinion. Hence, pluralism as such, which was present even in the New Testament times, as we know from the Scriptures, does not exist and the pluralism of theologies does not exist either. Nowadays, especially within the context I am speaking about, that kind of pluralism is not acceptable. Instead, a uniformed thinking is propagated, what is, in my view, wrong and leads to consequences that will be detrimental to the future of the Church.

Despite the fact that your immediate environment does not support the streams of thoughts that are close to you, you are still active in your small sphere of influence. What keeps that spark alive, what moves you to persist in your beliefs, in spite of all dangers, when adaptation and living in acceptance seems like an easier option?

That is actually the key question: Why do I stay here, why do I continue to fight? It is certainly not the case that I would be ready to abandon my position and to adapt harmful views in exchange for the comfort that the Church offers me. I try, as much as I can, to give my contribution to make the necessary changes happen. I believe that any other attitude would be just an opportunism, which is simply contradictory to everything that I am.

I also think that it is not possible to avoid the moment when the confrontation between me and my religious superiors will happen, precisely because of the attitudes I hold. I do not know how that conflict will end. If it causes my expulsion, I will feel sorry, but that is simply the price I will have to pay.

For the moment I remain silent and do not express my opinions explicitly. I do not impose them on others, because, to paraphrase the Gospel, my time has still not come. I think that it is necessary to attain a certain status and specific knowledge that will then be at my disposal and will help me to step out in a more responsible and fruitful way. It is similar to what Jesus did when he waited for the fullness of His time. I believe that He attended all those religious meetings with the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees not reacting explicitly against them and their teaching until His time was fulfilled. I hold that I will also, when the fullness of my times comes, have to react and follow my heart, my feelings, and my reason. What results that it will bring remains to be seen.

How do you expect things will develop in your country and in your community? What gives you hope, and what disappoints you?

My country is very small; changes and events that take place here are to a great extent dependent on external factors. With regards to Catholicism, they are dependent upon the pope, and theological movements supported by him. The election of Pope Francis as the bishop of Rome is something that gives me hope and optimism. It gives me hope that the unavoidable conflict will not lead to some tragic consequences, and that I will instead be able to

contribute to changing the mentality of my surrounding, at least a little bit.

I can say that I am relatively optimistic, but also cautious, bearing in mind that mentality is something that cannot be changed easily and that the Church in my country is deeply wounded, frustrated with communism and other relations in which She had to live. The Church moreover has difficulty accepting incentives that move Her to follow the Gospel more truthfully. Nevertheless, I believe in Providence and that things can become better.

Could you describe more precisely those movements of the Spirit that could enable you and people in similar situations to live their faith and vocation more freely?

That is simply a paradigm shift, a change in thinking, i.e. a refocusing of our deliberation. The election of Pope Francis who puts an emphasis on poverty, humility, simplicity, on that what was fundamental in the Gospel, gives me hope that the Church in my country will work on that, and put more stress on those elements.

Have you, during your personal and monastic education, met any person who left you with an impression that was different from the ideologically colored paradigm that you mentioned?

Among monks I did not find people of that kind. I did find however few lay people, but those were also rare exceptions. The reason for that is, I am afraid, the demeanor of the Church in my country which is very authoritarian and strict. As such, it repels people who are ready to think critically, those intellectuals that could contribute to positive changes both in the Church and in society. For that reason, I am afraid that there are very few people who think about the Church according to the aforementioned evangelical paradigm, and those few who do, are usually afraid to speak out, especially if they hold some position in the Church. They know that they will lose it if their opinions about different topics become public.

To summarize what we spoke about, it seems that the situation of the Church in your country, at least in its hierarchical structures, is marked with two segments – one is authoritarianism, and another one is fear. What are, in your view, the reasons for that?

That is very difficult to answer, and it is not perfectly clear to me either. I have mentioned the historical context, which certainly had an effect on this.

During the period of communism, the Church was perhaps not persecuted, but She certainly did not hold a position in society, which She claimed and held beforehand. This created many great frustrations within the Church, and led to the obsession with communism and the communist way of thinking. The germ of communism is sought everywhere. One could speak here of a manic fear of persecution; and that is certainly one important reason why the Church is so afraid of the world and why She holds such a strict and authoritative attitude against it.

On the other hand, we could also say that the internal structure of the Church promotes authoritarianism. The clergy is structured in such a way that key positions are occupied by people who are much less open to the public, and they are much more attuned to the protection of interests.

I believe that those are the two key reasons, one internal and one external, that lead to this situation.

Communism has been over for 25 years already. How come such a mentality is still so dominant when communism itself lasted 45 years altogether?

The problem lies in the lack of forgiveness and in the adaptation to new circumstances. It is clear that our Church has problems with both of these things. A similar situation occurred with the war that took place in my country, and left the aftermath, which is still powerful although it ended almost at the same time as communism.

We live in a situation of permanent crisis, and for the crisis, victims are sought. They are most easily found among proven former enemies. That is, I believe, the reason why the anti-communist mentality is still present.

When you spoke about the authoritarian structures, you mentioned that they are based in large part on the defense of internal interests. What interests are at stake here that they induce such a response that regarded all criticisms as betrayal?

On the one hand, it is about material interests since the Church in my country has a large material means at Her disposal and She only intends to protect or to extend them. On the other hand, it is about the protection of interests of the individuals, people who are regarded as someone to whom the Church owes something and whose mistakes should thus be hidden. Because of that, the key persons in the Church are not elected through the rational

procedure, but rather in prospect of achieving mutual benefits in the quickest and the most efficient way as possible. When the selection is based on that principle, then those people simply cannot do their job well, and that has long lasting consequences because the whole system suffers.

How do you imagine the future development of events in your country and society that pertain to faith, people belonging in the Church, the Church's reputation, the attitudes of monks and priests? What are your mid-term and long-term predictions?

It is difficult to be a good prophet because, as the case of the election of Pope Francis taught us, there are unpredictable events which can significantly change the situation and which at the same time do not follow what we imagined and planned before. In any case, I am looking forward to some positive changes. However, they will not happen easily for the ecclesial system in my country is solidified and resistant to changes. The Church is structured in a hierarchical way, what is on the one hand Her flaw – became very hierarchical after the Council – but on the other hand, that is Her advantage because people on the top can change the hierarchy below them very easily. Hence, everything depends on those who hold the key positions.

Let's imagine for the sake of argument that the leading cardinal in Croatia becomes a person who is open to the contemporary society – that would automatically and in a very short period lead to great changes in the system that we have today. By the same token, a person with a closed attitude would keep the situation the same for a long time, or even degrade it. It is difficult to predict anything, but we have to hope for the best and do what we can do within our narrow borders. That is somehow my life motto.

How do you look at new types of media, which, up to a certain degree, enables the articulation of critical voices? Do they open some place for action and do you expect that more people will engage with them in the future? Or perhaps, you see them as a space where criticism is allowed, but irrelevant?

I am afraid that the media cannot have a broader effect on the faithful people since it operates within a system that produces single-mindedness, a stereotypical way of thinking with no place for critical voices, where critical voices are automatically disregarded as heretical and schismatic. The hierarchy in my country operates with much greater possibilities than those of the concerned media. They run religious education in schools, they have pulpits at

their disposal, and they have annual addresses to the faithful. The voice of new kinds of media like blogs cannot reach the people, especially if the media is characterized as non-trustworthy and not in accordance with the teaching of the Church.

Nevertheless, that voice is very precious to those faithful who think differently, and they also exist. It gives them hope that there are indeed different ways of thinking in the Church, that orthodoxy is not one-mindedness, that there are topics on which we can have different opinions, that it is not necessary to accept without complaint everything that the hierarchy says or does. For people who live in such circumstances, who belong to the Church, the media is a very precious mechanism and I hope that it will gain a greater prominence. If I have the chance, I will certainly engage in it.

The whole Church, the Church as it is now, has to be entirely deconstructed and constructed again from Her foundations

A Former Friar and Priest Candidate Writes about His Experience with Clerics and Other Issues in the Local Church

Essay Written by Pavlović, Bosnia-Herzegovina
Translated from Croatian into English by the Author

Key words: ignoring believers, the Church = clerics, priesthood, celibate, ex-priests, lay persons

Before I start my story, I want to indicate that the instructions for writing this essay might already hint at how free thinking inside the Church looks like. Each participant was asked to respect the highest level of anonymity. That means that we should not use any personal data that could be an “indicator for easy personal identification”. This is not, however, a critique of the project or its authors and editors. Nevertheless, I want to emphasize that many believers neither have the chance to express their opinions nor are able to participate in decision-making processes that are important for community life.

I do not feel like being distant from the Church. On the contrary; I really care for Her, Her life, and future. Therefore, I am really concerned that, in my opinion, the mode of functioning of certain Church structures is in obvious discord with Jesus’ preaching. Moreover, such policies ignore the real needs and challenges of our time.

I do not feel like I am rejected from the Church either. However, I am completely ignored by Her whenever important and relevant decisions for the Church as a community have been taken. I am also completely ignored by the Church in my everyday life. I feel like a member of the Church only when something is expected from me like obediently carrying out Church

instructions, attending Mass, receiving the sacraments, and paying...

After primary school, I spent four years in a small seminary and one year in the novitiate. Almost at the end of my theological studies, I decided to abandon the idea of becoming a priest and I left the seminary.

The main reason why I had left was my disappointment with the friars and priests. My conscience and understanding of Christianity didn't allow me to stay or to become part of their community. Somehow, I was also affected by the fact that many good people left the priesthood and friary because they found their communities completely unauthentic, or there, they were bored since there was nothing to do, or because of some ridiculous regulation. However, the reactions of their ex-colleagues, those who remain in the priesthood, were scandalous. They would call those who had abandoned the priesthood 'traitors' and 'apostates'. They almost always claimed that the reason that someone abandoned the priesthood was because of a 'mysterious' woman. Of course, women were usually blamed for all evil since nobody wanted to see the real reasons and problems that forced a man who devoted his life to the priesthood and the Church to abandon everything.

I never understood nor accepted the way how they thought us, i.e. priest candidates, to deal with our emotions and sexuality. In my opinion, celibacy is inequitable coercion for all who wants to become priests, since if you want to become a priest, you have to accept celibacy. Therefore, celibacy cannot be presented as a choice – it is a condition. Of course, I met a lot of priests who are more predisposed to celibacy than to family life. However, there are many lay people who prefer celibacy over family life as well. Celibacy in-and-of itself is not a bad thing, but it should not be a condition for priesthood.

And how do priests deal with their celibacy and sexuality? Some of them remain immature all of their lives and are introverted persons, who out of fear from communication with others convince themselves that they are more valuable than others because they live in celibacy. On the other side, again, there are those priests who have partners and some of them also have children in secret. A part of them abandon the priesthood in the course of life and others remain living in secret with the parish assistant, cook, organist... Those who remain living in secret in this manner are doing so in order to avoid financial and existential problems; if they leave the priesthood, they have to start from the beginning.

In a conversation with an older priest about this issue, he said: "Each normal person should break the promise of celibacy. We had to sign that we

will live in celibacy in order to become priests. However, later in life, each person should find his own lifestyle which he could justify to himself and in front of God.”

I cannot accept such an explanation and behavior. Instead, they should initiate some necessary changes rather than living a double life and justifying it with a loophole: “This is how it’s actually supposed to be!”

However, if a priest decides to marry and start a family, he is prohibited from serving in his profession in any position within the Church. In some cases, Church officials, through their influence, even complicate finding a new job and starting a new career for a renegade priest. All this is retribution for ‘weaknesses’ as one priest said: “Those who abandon us should be punished with difficult and hard lives. Then, they’ll see who they betrayed and what privileges they renounced.”

However, despite all the difficulties, most ex-priests remain close to the Church. In my opinion, they are much closer to the men who walked beside Jesus than those who remain in the priesthood. The behavior of the latter, if they are reluctant to act, remain immature all their lives, because they live alienated from their fellow humans. This is more like the behavior of Jesus’ opponents.

Nevertheless, the main issue should not be celibacy but, rather, the question, who is accepted into the priesthood in the Church today? Do those men, i.e. priest candidates, meet the conditions required by the Apostle Paul: To be serious and mature, persons who proved themselves as honorable family men and members of society? Did they acquire important knowledge and experiences so they may be credible and calm priests? Or, are they rather young, immature, frightened persons who strayed into the priesthood or who came there with the wrong motives?

In my opinion, if celibacy wouldn’t be the main condition for priesthood, but a choice, there would be more people attracted to join. Those persons would be more interested to work for the Church and for the people. Then, there would be much less various ‘would-be managers’, losers, idlers, and immature persons who have no idea what to do with their lives and therefore, they try to hide themselves behind the Church’s walls. It is such nonsense and a great loss for our Church that so many good and honorable men are excluded from the sacrament of Holy Orders while on the other side, so many incompetent persons are allowed to become priests. Moreover, because the priestly vocation attracts such incompetent persons, the situation of

Catholic Faculties of Theology is miserable. Those institutions deviated from their educational and scientific mission and become only 'priest factories'.

I have the impression that priests today do not need Theology at all. Many parish priests are managers of parish real estates, businessmen, constructors, etc., and have very little contact with their parishioners. If this is what our Church needs in our time, it would be better if candidates for the priesthood would study management for 3 to 4 years or similar studies and just a little bit about Christianity rather than Theology. There is no need to study Theology if they are not going to use it in their ministries. I have heard from one of my colleagues that he is studying Theology: "Only because I have to do it. Otherwise I would never do it, never in my life."

Many visitors that came from abroad to parishes in my country during the major festivities are impressed with the number of churchgoers. Such an impression usually leads to the logical conclusion that parishes in Bosnia-Herzegovina have a huge number of committed believers who participate in the life of their parish. However, the reality is different.

The majority of believers go to church either because of tradition or because of fear, because of boredom or because they are forced to go to church. Usually, the most dishonest and socially insensitive individuals, like corrupted politicians, rich capitalists who exploit their brothers along with other 'public sinners' can be seen sitting in the first rows. There is nothing bad in the fact that those people are coming to church. Actually, their place is indeed there and priests should be seen accompanying them if they are following Jesus' example. However, our priests do not 'liberate' the sinners from their sin. On the contrary, they join them.

When a priest visits the homes of believers, most of them welcome him with anxiety, as if a priest is a demigod. Such an attitude complicates the life of priests too, or at least the lives of those priests who want to be treated as humans.

Many lay theologians in my country are unemployed or they cannot find any job. However, paradoxically, many priests and nuns, who are teaching religious classes in elementary and secondary schools constantly complain that they have to work too much and have no time for all of their parish duties. It is an absurd situation. If they hand over their duties in schools to lay theologians, they would have more time for their duties in parishes.

However, if a layperson got a job in one of the many Church institutions, he or she is always subordinate to his colleague, the priest. All leading

positions are occupied by priests, regardless of their education, skills, and talents. Thus, priests are *de facto* the 'privileged caste' or 'upper class' in the local Church.

When I was about to leave the seminary, my preceptor asked me: "Why are you leaving the Church's upper class?" I replied that his question contains the answer. What classes? How can anyone, and especially one who is responsible for the education of future priests, imagine that in the Church, there are classes, that clerics are of the 'upper class'?

However, it's a fact that many clerics as well as laymen understand the term, 'Church' only in terms of clerics. In other words, the clerics are the Church. Therefore, it is not strange that only the clerics administer absolutely everything in the Church and only they have the right to make decisions. Thus, the priests are not coming from the 'People of God'. They are not chosen among the People, but they are taken as adolescents, educated, and trained in a completely different world that is isolated and protected from the People. In such a priestly world, there is no place for family; there is no place for emotion and there is no place for women.

One intellectual recently said: "The Church loudly repudiates same-sex unions. However, the very essence or the basis of the Church structure is the same-sex community." Thus, if the Church is the clerics, the abovementioned sentence is correct.

From the social engagement in society and material wealth of the clerics, it is obvious that they are indeed the 'upper class' and do not have much in common with believers, i.e. the 'lower class'. Clerical social engagement is confined to issues about sexual morality (e.g. condoms, contraception, and abortion), Caritas activities, and meaningless and useless conferences about the Church's social teaching.

They do not do as Jesus had done. They do not oppose unfair socio-political systems that exploit the poorest and make people even poorer, hungry, and homeless. On the contrary, members of the socio-political elite are very welcomed guests of monasteries and parishes. If there is any cleric who might protest against receptions and friendships with those who are responsible for the socio-economic and political misery of society, they are immediately silenced with wise advice to dedicate themselves more to prayer and spirituality instead of politics.

When it comes to the humanitarian activities and projects, they are usually awkwardly planned and badly executed. This happens mainly because clerics

who were never in need themselves, who were never hungry, and who live isolated from the poor are not able to understand the needs of those who are poor, hungry, homeless, or generally in need. Maybe, only the older clerics, who lived with people during the communist regime, war, and the post-war period, are exceptions.

Could this situation in the Church change? If we are to believe what one priest said at a yearly meeting of all priests in the local Church: "Whoever cannot accept the Church as it is; he can go away!"; thus, we should not expect much from clerics.

The whole Church, the Church as it is now, has to be entirely deconstructed and constructed again from Her foundation. Cosmetic external changes are not enough.

We should not expect priests to start any reforms. Neither are the young priests, who before their ordination loudly declared that changes are necessary, are going to do anything. Usually, after their ordinations, this issue is not a topic anymore. On the one side, such behavior is expected. Once a young person enters into clerical society, he doesn't have to care about any existential problems. Since he enjoys all privileges and advantages of the clerical status, he cannot speak against the system that 'feeds him'. However, in my opinion, although this system 'liberates' a cleric from hard labor, existential problems, and responsibilities for his own family, allegedly in order to increase the quality and quantity of priestly services, it actually alienates him from his fellow humans and the Gospel. In order to understand and to help his brethren in Christ, he has to be 'clothed' in the same 'skin' as they are. Was it not what God, through Jesus, had done?

It is the lay person who has to be more decisive and active. Unfortunately, many lay theologians are brainwashed and frightened not to endanger their incomes that feed them and their families. Therefore, they are even more vigorous than the most conservative priests in defending the present state of the Church.

How does one keep the faith in such an environment? In my opinion, faith is a personal choice, and as such, it does not depend on errors or the faith models of others. Also, one should not blindly follow representatives or his or her role models, but he or she has to build their own personal relationships with God.

I believe that something can be changed and become better, even if it is only on a small scale. Also, I believe that we have to do good, have

confidence in our brethren, and open ourselves to others and the world. We should not hide ourselves and live in fear. My confidence in a better future is not shattered despite many problems because there are still many humble and honest priests who, despite all problems, manage to change many lives for the better. There are also many ordinary and simple lay persons who are doing so many good things. Those who open themselves to life and to the world without fear are able to recognize the Divine presence in every small detail and God's creation. On the other side, those who close themselves off to the world and live with their fears will only see darkness, conspiracy, and danger in everything. For them, even the necessary changes and needs of the time will be understood as dangerous activities.

I believe in God who is not a motionless monument or executor of our wishes, but God who is full of surprises that drives us to think and change. Therefore, I believe that He will surprise all of us with His changes for His Church.

The main question of this essay was: 'Could I find a place in the Church that helps me to develop my personality and spirituality in full freedom and openness?'

My answer is: Yes I can! There are many such places. Almost all those places are in the peripheries of the Church where marginalized believers, priests, and theologians who are not happy with the current situation in the Church live.

I am staying here!

A Spiritual Path of a Freelance Theologian

Interview with Ruder, Croatia
Interview Held in Croatian and Translated into English
by Stipe Odak

Key words: theologian, priestly formation, Church hierarchy, popular religiosity, religious control, salvation, spiritual quest

Can you briefly describe the context in which you grew up and the development of your relationship with the Church?

I grew up under communism, which means that the Church in that period was still half-illegal. Since my father and mother were not members of the communist party, the Church was always the first option in our home. It represented a place of refuge. When we moved to Novi Zagreb, the church there was still being built, and we gathered for the celebrations of the Mass in some sheds, what always created a particular family atmosphere. We were always in good relations with priests and nuns. When I was a child, I remember that nuns always gave me candies and toys. During that time, everything looked very positive in my eyes.

What happened later; how did that image develop further?

During the following years, my image of the Church stayed the same. I always felt like I was a part of the Church, but with time, while I was growing up, I attended church less and less. For me as a child, it was terribly difficult to go to church. I could not understand anything. I was not one of those kids who was a member of a choir or who was an altar boy because I was pretty shy and did not feel comfortable in such surroundings. Physically, I became a little distant, but in my heart, I remained a member who loved his Church and who always had a good word to say about Her.

How did that process continue during high school?

During our high school years, we attended church very rarely, although my feelings stayed the same as before. I simply could not find a reason to go to church. I was not afraid of God, so that I would go just out of fear. On the other hand, I could not find any spiritual satisfaction there or a practical reason to go. I was never a part of ‘something’ in the Church. As I was growing older, the gap in me was also growing bigger and bigger.

When did the next change in your relationship with the Church occur?

At some point, my friends started to go to church. A lot of them. That was the period after high school when I was 19-20 years old. I felt that I also wanted to go because now, I had somebody there. Moreover, I felt even more ‘qualified’ to go to church than them because I, unlike them, used to go there before. I somehow felt ‘more at home’ there than they did. But all that still came down to participation in Sunday celebrations. During the same period, I also started to feel emotions that I later identified as a ‘stumbling block’.

Can you clarify that a little bit more?

At that time, we already had the Republic of Croatia, and everybody started to go to church in large masses. I felt like my relationship to the Church as a community was impersonal – there was a mass of people that came, but they did not know the reason why. That also included myself. At that point, I started to feel the illogicality of the whole system.

How did you feel at that moment?

I felt slightly marginalized, but it was because I marginalized myself. That was perfectly clear to me. No one else marginalized me.

Which things did you like, and which things bothered you back then?

Priests always fascinated me, and deep down in myself I always felt attracted to that vocation. Seeing a priest outside of a church would have caused, practically speaking, shock. He was a man that you rarely saw, but when you met him, your whole relationship to him would have been full of awe and mysticism. Now, I do not really know whether that attracted me or put me off. Today, that puts me off, but perhaps at that time, I found it attractive.

What happened later in your spiritual life?

In general, I continued to go to church on Sundays. Unrelated to that, my brother experienced a true conversion in a Paulian sense, which is a complete conversion. He went on foot to Međugorje and came back transformed, completely on a 'spiritual high'. I was very skeptical, but soon after my parents also went to Međugorje, and everybody was amazed by that place. Everybody experienced something. I persisted to be skeptical, but also curious at the same time.

I got in contact with an old friend from primary school who was all the time close to the Church. He was conducting the church choir and was looking for a drummer for his band. I offered to play the drums for him, not in the church, but in his band, which plays Christian music. Then he asked me to play the bongos in the church. At first, I went for rehearsals, which were held in church rooms, and then I also started going to Mass regularly, every single Sunday. During that period, I became acquainted with a charismatic movement, and one member asked me to play the drums in their band. Soon after that, we were playing at their prayer meetings all across the country.

In those moments, I rediscovered the meaning of community. That friend of mine and his band seemed like great people to me. They did not use bad language; they did not drink; they did not do anything but spent time in church – at least, that is how I saw them. Of course, when you are with them, you also use better language, drink less and you present yourself in a different light because you feel uncomfortable to show them your vices or sins; you act like a saint.

As the time went by, I spent more and more time with the charismatics. I did not have any other commitments, and that movement played an increasingly important role in my life. Then they started with the healing prayers, which were presided by a certain priest. At the time, I also felt a part of that. I went to Confession regularly; I believed in everything that was said from the altar; everything was great... Meanwhile, I read books such as those about Maria Valtorta, and various 'revelations' of that kind. I was interested in everything – what the color of Jesus's hair was, if He went to the toilet or not...

It was very popular back then to speak in tongues. They prayed over me hundreds of times so that I could also pray in tongues, but I simply could not do that. Everybody else around me did pray in tongues, although that prayer seemed pathetic to me. I had my first doubts that many of them were

pretending. But, okay, I left that aside.

Then, I experienced a great life disappointment. One of my friends hurt me very much, and because of that, I completely moved away from my friends that I had before becoming completely engaged in the parish activities.

That was when I also decided to go on foot to Međugorje. I went together with one of my brother's friends, who I did not know before. We walked for 12 days in +40°C to Međugorje. I expected some miracle there. As a matter of fact, I went there with the intention of discerning what I should do – whether to join the Franciscans or not. A call for priesthood was burning in me very strongly at that time. But, I felt total numbness in my head when I got there. I went for Confession and a friar who was hearing my Confession told me to go to the Franciscans because I had nothing to lose. He said that with such an easiness that I felt kind of offended, because I expected some 'grand revelation' and I only received an answer: "So go, you have nothing to lose, even if you come out later." I did not want to hear that, but I heard exactly that, and felt slightly disappointed. However, I rationalized that to myself saying that God wanted me to reach the conclusion that I shall go without any great revelations. And it was indeed so. It was in June that I went to Međugorje, and in September that I joined the Franciscans.

With that moment, I assume, a new phase of your life began?

I left home crying because I expected that I would be leaving once and for all, that there was no return anymore.

I shared a room with a guy from Bosnia-Herzegovina, and when I entered the room, he had mud on his face. I realized later that he had skin problems. Initially, I thought that he was doing that to mortify himself. Then, I met another guy who was playing the guitar. During the first few days, we became friends and we decided to share a room since we were both playing the guitar. That was the worst decision I could have ever made because he was a very traumatized person.

When did the next transformation occur?

The next transformation occurred during the novitiate. Regarding the discipline, the life of celibacy started to bring about negative consequences. The novitiate was in a place where female members of the Franciscan youth gather. I was a handsome man who played the guitar and very soon, they started to gather around me. It was very difficult. I started to slowly question

whether I really wanted to spend my life in such a way that I shake every time a girl puts her hand on my shoulder just to give me a pat. That is a very strong force! Especially when you are not even allowed to look at a woman because that is not decent; you wear a habit.

Was that the first time when you started to question your vocation, or did that last over a longer period?

When we were still in the pre-novitiate, we used to make comments about pretty women and such, but the real questioning started in the novitiate. I asked myself whether that really was something I truly wanted in my life – to mortify myself and let my psyche be injured. That attraction is a powerful lever in a man's psyche that breaks him if he does not withstand it. It really breaks him! One has to be very strong, very mature, in order to resist it correctly. Moreover, I fell in love with a girl. That was something expected since I was always with them. When we became novices, we also started to receive various gossips about other friars. The main curiosities were whether some friar was a homosexual or not, who is with whom, who has a wife, who does not have a wife, which cars do they drive...

I noticed then that the standard of living there was well above the state average. It is nice to live that way; you get whatever you want. Money was really not a problem – whatever you need, you will get. The only thing you have to do is to be in the right places: attend the morning prayers, all the activities, a Mass in the evening, and you will have everything.

Was that the period when your illusions were destroyed?

Yes, that was a complete destruction of my illusions. In the seminary, I started to drink a lot because I did not care anymore. I completely lost the purpose. I did not find any sense in taking part in devotions for older ladies, which did not have any purpose whatsoever except that grannies could attend them and drop something in the alms box.

We were given no responsibilities besides “Go to the faculty, fulfill the daily schedule, and clean your part of the monastery on Saturdays.” No responsibility, no individual approach in which I would be valued as an individual. There was just a chaotic approach instead – you are just a number; nobody even knows your name, and if somebody does, you should feel lucky.

Step by step, I realized that I was turning into a man I did not want to be. I did not want to be unhappy; I did not want to be frustrated; I did not want to

be part of a community, which is an end in itself and which organizes everything according to its own interests. I started to fight against that by drinking, skipping prayers and Masses. Because of the burden that was placed upon me, all those things did not mean anything to me.

Everything had to be done under a strict imperative – the rosary, Mass, Divine Office – and all these orders came in great quantities. As if somebody was feeding you a lobster all the time and force-feeding you one spoon after another; you cannot chew anymore; at some point, you spit it out. You are eating the finest food, but you feel disgusted because you cannot take it anymore. I was already fed up even when somebody mentioned the names God, Jesus, and the Church – Come on, go away!

God is just an instrument to achieve something there. If they were really seeking God, they would have not prostituted God's name so much. It was really used for everything. I used to hear the name God and Jesus around 130 times a day. That is too much. The same goes for forcing people to attend Mass. On Sundays, I used to 'do' three Masses. A Mass became just an ordinary routine. An odious routine. You have to listen to the same things over again, homilies are boring, and priests do not take time for preparation.

At which moment did you start to feel marginalized, or distant from the Church?

Precisely at that point when I said that I was leaving the Franciscans. That was the first moment. I remained there for the following two weeks because my vocation director asked me to leave on a specific date because of some reasons. I accepted that, but I was wearing a habit only when I was joining them during the evening Mass. Towards the end, I did not even attend a daily Mass; I lived there as an ordinary lay person.

During that time, I felt the looks of others on myself. They already started to speak differently with me.

When I finally went out, then it really started... I had to explain to everybody what happened. That was the period when I was apologizing to everybody, especially in my parish. Then I simply ran away from the parish because I could not look at those faces that were looking at me. I don't know, maybe it was more about me than about them; I don't know, but I had to leave. I felt that everybody saw just one big disappointment in me.

And it was indeed so. I remember that, before I joined the Franciscans, one seminarian came to our parish. We became friends and after several

months, I asked the chaplain where that guy was. “Ah!” he said, “He went out.” I was at that moment deeply disappointed – “How it is possible that he went out?” Being spiritually undeveloped, I believed at that time that he was an enemy of the Church.

However, the faithful are nowadays, by large, spiritually undeveloped people, and they think in a similar way about those who do the same. That was later confirmed when people who I trusted told me what others were speaking about me. I also realized that through conversations. People really saw that act of mine as a great handicap.

What was your inner spiritual and emotional life like during that period?

I had much more important things to think about than what my parish thought of me and how they looked at me. Since I moved to another city, I did not go to my parish church anymore. I stopped attending Mass in general. I attended it only here and there, if somebody invited me, if there was some celebration, etc. In me, one big nothing reigned. I decided not to go to Mass regularly. I simply did not feel the need to do so.

Alongside of that, a lot of question marks were growing inside of me. I had so many questions, but I had no answers, and there was nobody whom I could ask. Those question marks were piling up.

While I was studying Theology, I started to read various books. Little by little, sometimes through books, sometimes through my own reflections, and sometimes through my faculty studies, I started to receive answers. They came with a delay of a year and a half, and they were not positive for the Church. As the answers were more negative, I became even more curious and was reading more.

What I was reading at that time was not some kind of ‘dissident’ literature written by some schismatic. I was reading just ordinary theological literature that was compulsory at the faculty, or perhaps some neutral books. What was more important was the fact that I was broadening my horizons. That was significant, not the concrete things that gave me particular answers to my questions. I broadened my horizons through different sources, and as I was broadening them, the answers simply came to me.

Which answers were they?

Those were the answers for questions such as: “Why is the Church as it

is?”, “Why did I have to go?”, “Why was it a good thing to go?”, “Why did the Church lose more because of my leaving than I did?”, “Why is the Church organized in such a way that She pushes good people away?” I was not the only one who left; during my Franciscan formation, many went out, many good people who could have been excellent priests. Furthermore, there were questions relating to the teaching of the Church, and the realization that the Church manipulated Her own teaching to achieve certain goals. Overall, that was a wide set of questions that opened up new horizons for me.

Did you have any doubts at that time that needed to be resolved? How could you decide which answers were true, and which answers were false?

I had a pretty rich experience. I have come a long way from being a naive newly converted person, from a completely innocent and simple-minded phase of religiosity that belonged to the Stone Age. I was maturing and finally became a pretty hard nut to crack. Precisely that experience of passing through all those phases, maybe not all, but through a great part of them, that very experience during which I met a great number of people who were in similar phases as me, seeing them going down dead-end streets and not coming back, going either into some insane devotions that either occupy them fully or into some crazy atheism where nothing has value anymore – all those experiences told me what was good, and what was bad.

While I was reading books and getting new insights, it became clear to me, as it was served on a plate, which information was relevant and which was not. Of course, I was filtering through information. I rejected some aspects of the information that I studied, but I also embraced many of them. What encouraged me most in my seeking was the fact that I found people in different parts of the world who had similar or the same views as me. We were saying the same things – somebody in a cold, German, systematic way, somebody in a Balkanic, emotional way, and somebody else in a liberal, American way, etc. But we are all saying the same thing. What I discovered in my own way – I realized – exists independently of me or anybody else, concentrated in different parts of the world.

During that process of receiving answers, did you feel peace, unrest, confusion...?

Well, I felt unrest because I knew that there were very few people who would decide to go the same way as I did. It is a matter of fact that

seminarians and prospective novices that I met never passed through such a process. Of course, everybody has his or her own way. However, when people leave a monastery, they either cross-out the Church once and for all, or they become lay servants who are close to the hierarchy or who take a position in some Church offices.

How would you describe your own situation?

Physically, I went out from the hierarchical Church, but I am still here. I have my own blog; everybody around me knows what I think and what I say. But everybody also knows that I am still a Catholic and that I am not going anywhere. I am staying here!

Why is it so?

Because this is my Church! I was planted here, and here I grow. I do not find it meaningful to become a Protestant now and to pass through the same disappointments one more time. Let us be aware that every church denomination has its own problems. I do not want to run away from one into some other, perhaps even a worse community. There is also another reason! If I leave my Church, I will lose my credibility, both as a theologian and as ‘a voice crying out in the desert’. If that happened, I would scream and they would simply close the doors. But now, while I am still inside, my voice means something; it has its merit. And why do I want my voice to have merit? Because faithful people deserve God! Here you are; that is really the only reason. The faithful deserve God and I want the Church to give them God and not Herself.

Can you explain in a little more detail which things bother you and block people's way to God?

My fundamental criticism of the Church is that the Church doses out salvation with a dropper. They dose out God and God's salvation. With a dropper! As if they drop, every hour, one drop of ink into 500 liters of water. There is no use in that. People are getting suffocated by their existential, psychological, or family problems. People suffer, and the Church still does not give them God!

It is suggested to them: “Well, well, come here, fulfill these and those requirements. Even when you fulfill them all, you are still not good enough; you still have to repent! And only then will we give you God via prescription. Here you are, a little bit, but do not become arrogant!” That is a dreadful

malfeasance of God and His salvation. I think that it is the fundamental problem.

All other problems lead to it. In other words, the problem of priests, of their exclusivity, their untouchability, their separation from lay people, the problem of celibacy, etc., all those stem from this one fundamental problem. Attached to it are also material opulence, intimidation towards lay people, the silencing of non-conformist theologians, the dumbing down of people by infantile devotions, etc.

The fact is that the faithful are being deprived of salvation. Actually, they are not being deprived of salvation because God gave salvation as a gift, but they are deprived of the consciousness of salvation! And that is the fundamental sin of the Church!

What is your attitude towards salvation?

Very simple – I am saved! I think that Jesus Christ did not found any kind of Church. He came and died for humankind. Afterwards, his disciples started to organize things. According to the dictates of the Holy Spirit, they say. Okay, I can accept that. But, we cannot limit that power of God's salvation to 'ourselves', and keep those outside away.

Your life changed quite a lot. How would you describe your present relationship with God? What remained the same, and what changed?

My relationship with God is a turbulent one. I am a doubter! That is how I would describe myself first and foremost because I doubt on a daily basis. I always doubt God. During some periods in the history of theology, mere doubt was characterized as a great sin. But I am a sinner; I am an enormous sinner. It is my very nature to be a sinning human being who was created sinful – not as a saint, but sinful. But I am also accepted as such. I am not accepted as the one I could be, as the one I should be, or as the one who conforms to the standard of a community, be it the Church, academia, or any other kind of community. No, I am accepted the way I am – as an imperfect, sinful, doubter! I am created to doubt, and that is what I am.

Very often, I do not find what I am looking for, and then I am angry. I mean, I become angry with God in a human way. And I doubt again. I frequently ask myself whether it is possible to arrive somewhere. But through that doubt, I grow. That is my relationship with God.

Do you have any doubts whether you are on the right path?

No. I am on the right path because I realized that God loves me the way that I am. God loves me on my own path. And all that I have been through, it is my path chosen by Him. As I move forward, I can see more clearly that somebody directed that path. It sounds like a *cliché*, but my path is specific in many ways.

What do you think is the biggest sin of the contemporary Church and which changes could help people like you?

The biggest sin of the Church, aside from the aforementioned deprivation of salvation from the ordinary people who suffer, is the preservation of the position of power. There is a climate in which a caste of separated people is being created to whom the power is guaranteed. I have priests in mind. That is the biggest sin of the Church – insatiable will to power, which is then achieved through various mechanisms.

Besides, that consciousness of salvation is taken away from people for a reason! The aim is to keep people insecure, small, obedient, and humble so that they – kept in fear of non-salvation – cannot stir up the waters and raise the mud from the bottom. That is done in order not to change anything, and keep things as they are now.

When somebody realizes that he or she is saved, that person changes things, goes forward, breaks the concepts, as Christ once used to break them. Christ decided to bring salvation, and He was breaking *clichés*. When a person realizes that salvation, they also break the common images, and those who are in a position of power do not like that. If every faithful person realized that he or she is saved, priests would lose a great deal of power they now have, and that power makes them special. When I speak with priests, I see that the possibility of having a spiritual rule over people gives meaning to their lives. Many priests completely missed their vocation because they live for power and power is sweet.

Christians would see many signs of the time if they were not closing their eyes and if they were not ignoring new challenges of spreading the Good News

Observation of a Lay Theologian about Parish Pastoral Care and the Position of Lay Theologians in the Local Church

Essay Written by Boka, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Translated from Croatian into English

by Marijan Oršolić

Key words: traditional faith, parish pastoral, charismatic movements, Franciscan spirituality, relation between clerics and laypersons, relation between Church hierarchy and lay theologians

In the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church had a closed-minded perspective and She was almost the only religious society in Europe. In those times, a person could exist only if he or she was a believer, i.e. if one asserted that he or she believed what the Church taught and did what Church officials commanded. There was no other option or alternative. Much time has passed since then, and many changes have happened, like plurality and openness towards other religions. However, in my opinion, much of the previously mentioned mentality has survived. It is especially true for my home country Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Before I realized that this was happening in the local Church as a student of Theology, I behaved as any other ordinary churchgoer. I fulfilled all formalities that a believer is supposed to do: I went to church on Sundays and practiced traditional spirituality. I had never heard about parish catechesis, the parish council, or different forms of evangelization.

Various Catholic movements went through our parish offering their methods of interpreting the Bible and spirituality. However, the parish priests

didn't have any interest in anything other than the 'Franciscan charisma' or 'Franciscan spirituality'. I'm not criticizing it. However, many friars only speak about 'Franciscan spirituality' but they do nothing to put it into practice. Therefore, it is not strange that in such a passive parish where believers were neglected, a charismatic movement found many members and admirers.

In my opinion, the success of this movement is based on the fact that believers find in its idea what they needed for a more active and fully affective faith. Since parish priests offered them too little and approached them from an ivory tower, this movement became the alternative for the parish. For the first time in their lives, members of that particular movement felt like active members and not only passive listeners. However, as it could be expected, believers who joined this movement soon started to become detached from the parish.

Of course, it cannot be claimed that this 'alternative' movement brings about a new kind of faith and relations within the group that would be different from a clerical one. They too stereotype people; they too divide between those who are 'inside' and 'outside' of the group; they also present and speak about the faith only on an emotional level and they doubt about the intellect and reason as well, etc.

Only when I was a Theology student did I work out how many things in our local Church have been set in a socially outdated dualistic relation. On one side, there is hierarchy and clerics and on the other side, lay parsons, i.e. ordinary believers.

It is unbelievable that such kinds of relations, established a long time ago, are still present in the 21st century. Such absurd situations are happening every day. It could be heard in a homily when a priest says 'you' and points with his finger at the believers, or in the phrase that clerics use between themselves: "the less, the better", i.e. the less contact with believers, the better. In this way, the contact between clerics, those who are supposed to be servants, leaders, and elders, and believers only came down to the Eucharist, the celebration of other sacraments and funerals. I am deeply convinced that this way in which the hierarchy and clerics treat believers is wrong and it has to be changed.

In the Church, there are, as Tomáš Halík assumes, those who are 'acclimatized', and those who are 'seekers'. The former prefer a passive faith because then nothing is asked from them while the latter, through their search, make their faith more alive. However, today, there are not so many

seekers. I think that clerics are the most responsible for this situation. They led believers for centuries only to passivity and obedience instead of including them and inviting them to participate actively in the life of the Church and to offer them lifelong catechesis.

In the place where I grew up, there is nothing like Bible classes and catechesis for ordinary believers. In such an environment, one could feel the crisis of pastoral activity and its lack of efficiency.

On the other side, the process of opening up the Church to the world made the priestly vocation unclear or uncertain. Maybe, in this fact lies the main cause of why clerics are so disorientated in their relation to society and believers, and why they have problems in defining their activities.

For a long time, laypersons in the West have conducted many tasks in their parishes. However, in my country, only clerics and nuns conduct all those duties and tasks in the parish. Therefore, priests are wondering what their role will be and even what their identity will be if part of the parish work will be entrusted to lay theologians or other laypersons.

The relation between the hierarchy and theologians, and especially lay theologians is also very perplexing. In my country, as well as in the neighboring countries, there is no plan for regulating the question of employment for theologians. Persons with a degree in Sacred Theology have a very small chance in getting any job that demands such education.

Instead of using the potential of lay theologians, the hierarchy ignores and marginalizes them. There is no plan to employ so many people as pastoral assistants either. The paradox is that the Church educational institutions have educated all those persons and each year there are more and more educated lay theologians who are eager to work for the Church. The most probable position one could get is being a religion teacher in elementary and secondary schools. However, the waiting list to get the job there is quite long.

The hierarchy simply ignores this problem among many others. Although this issue is not simple, nor would it be easily solved in the near future, it is quite frustrating for many lay theologians. Their voices are not heard. Were they 'clerics' with the same qualifications, there would be no problem in engaging them in pastoral work. Thus, they have to look for other jobs outside of the Church.

In this essay, I have only briefly mentioned some open issues in the local Church that I find to be the most important. However, many other issues

have to be opened, analyzed, and solved.

For example, one important issue is the partial and inconsistent information of believers about Church activities and faith topics. Probably, somebody is calculating: "The less the better", i.e. the less information that is offered, the fewer critics there will be.

Other important issues could be the opinion that mistakenly equates the national and religious identities, the mistrust towards the secular world and science, the incomprehensible language of the Church, which drives the people away from Her, skepticism of some believers towards new trends in theology and liturgy, etc.

Of course, there are also many good and positive examples in the Church. They are present everywhere where people are ready to search for the signs of our time in freedom and openness. Christians would see many signs of the time if they were not closing their eyes and if they were not ignoring new challenges of spreading the Good News of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Church is fallible because we are the Church

A Former Friar Speaks about His Experience in Franciscan Community

Interview with Algirdas, Lithuania
Interview Held in Lithuanian and Translated into English
by Vaiva Adomaityte

Key words: Taizé community, religious vocation, community life, brotherly relationship, St. Francis, obedience, the Christian identity

How would you describe your current relationship with the institutional Church?

If I would describe my relationship with the Church I would not call myself a traditional Catholic. I do try to live an active Christian life. Besides going to church every Sunday, I try to keep my prayer life to one or two short moments during the day, usually mornings and evenings.

Could you tell us your story of being a Franciscan brother? What was your motivation to take this step, to become a brother?

Well, it did not start all at once; the essential break in my thinking about community life came after I lived for one year in the Taizé Community in France. I spent a whole year there working as a volunteer, aiding the community brothers to welcome the youth from various European countries. And this year of community life, the common work, and prayers with the brothers helped me to understand what I wanted and led me to the Franciscans. Why the Franciscans? I think, because they appealed to me because of their simple way of living, their very open attitude, and the simple way in which they approached people. Of course, the personal example of St. Francis was also very appealing to me and influenced my choice of joining the Franciscans.

And before Taizé, did you think of becoming a friar or did the idea only occur there?

No, Taizé was the main experience; I did not think of becoming a friar prior to it.

How old were you at that moment?

I was about thirty years old when I joined the order. I was mature enough at that time.

We can say that the Taizé experience served as a motivation to join the order, but what was the trigger to leave it?

How can I put this into words? Let us just say some personal aspects were not in harmony: Such as the opinion about prayer, about community life. Mainly this. Franciscan life still charms me, but I try to do it in my own personal way, not through community life, to follow the example of St. Francis. Yes, those were personal reasons.

Could we say that community life disappointed you?

Not really, only to some degree. It always depends on a particular community that you are in, and the particular people that you meet there.

You say ‘to some degree’; what was the main thing that disappointed you there?

I could not say I was disappointed in the community life itself; I was more disappointed in the perception of some brothers, in their attitudes towards prayer life, in their perception where we are as friars. I could call it ‘differences in the identity’ – there were many things told in one manner, but actions were different. That disappointed me a little.

Maybe you could give an example of this?

For example, brothers would say that all of the community members are equal, but in reality, the senior friars, the friars with permanent vows allowed themselves not to participate in the common prayer. In addition, some of the house chores were given only to the novices, the superiors telling us that this will allow our obedience to grow. Also, not enough attention was given to the novices; the superiors did not pay enough attention to their feelings, how one felt in the community, what one found precious. I could say that it was more of a superficial way of dealing with community life. I missed this brotherly

relationship in that community.

Is it fair to say that when you were in the heart of the Church in the order, you did not feel that the principle of justice was practiced there?

Partially. What I mean is that I missed the brotherly relationship, the one that St. Francis talked about, the one that we can find in the Franciscan Rule. I got a different impression of it.

Maybe you can remember one main event that made you think: Enough this is not where I want to be!?

Let us just put it like this – I expressed my opinion in a critical way, and it was understood as a lack of obedience or something of that sort and we had to part.

Do you sometimes miss your Franciscan life?

Yes, I miss it a little.

Maybe you could start it here, in Belgium, all over again?

I think of it sometimes, but I am not really sure about it at the moment. No, I think that it won't happen. But you never know the ways that God leads you.

How important is your Christianity in your daily life? Does it give you inspirations or motivation for your actions and decisions?

The Christian faith influences my life without any doubt. I try to start and end my day with a personal connection with God: prayer, or a conversation, or a moment of silence. It helps me during the day. When I am irritated or angry, I am questioning my irritation or anger from the Christian perspective. Of course, not everything is perfect, but at least I try to look at situations from the Christian perspective; this Christian relationship stops my negative expressions. For example, if I am so angry that I want to tell people something not really nice, being a Christian stops my negativity. I try to look at things from the positive point of view, from the point of view that the others might have even harder times than me. I trust in God; I trust that I need to move on.

Could we say that your Christian identity defines your daily life?

Yes, yes, maybe I am not always successful at it, but yes.

Do you feel welcomed by your local faith community?

I think, yes. I can tell that people in the parish I attend create a youthful and dynamic community. People are kind; of course, the language barrier creates some problems, but I think that it is a good community.

What about your history as a Christian: When you were a child, how did you feel in your community back then in Lithuania? Could you describe some of those experiences as you were growing up?

I found the faith rather late in my life. I was seventeen years old. I grew up in times of communism so I was actually an active member of the *Latvian Young Communist League*. I did not like it from the political perspective, but because of the cultural activity. I was attracted by the chance to do something together with others. In my teenage years, I was really active in a so-called *Pioneer Organization*. I attended all of their events. Even in high school, I held a high position concerning that kind of activity. My faith life, as I have already mentioned, started when I was seventeen years old in 1989 when Lithuania was regaining its independence. With the movement of independence, my faith life also started.

What/who was the central character or the main inspiration that brought you to the Church?

I think that the first motivation was my Baptism, actually. I met this Catholic lady through some common acquaintances. She was a translator, a very kind lady and she asked me once if I would like to be baptized. I answered immediately and very spontaneously: “Yes”. Through these common acquaintances, she introduced me to a well-renowned Lithuanian-American philanthropic family. They became my godparents. I could say that from the moment of Baptism I took my first steps in faith.

Where was your first Christian community?

My first community was in a parish in Vilnius and it was based on Sunday liturgy meetings. I was taking my first hesitant steps as a Christian there. However, I became more active as a member of the Christian community in another parish. I was about to graduate from high school, around 1994, when I joined their Christian youth and helped to animate groups of small children.

What did you find appealing in the Christian Church? Why the Church?

I liked my young peers, the lively relationship with God. I liked the idea that faith is not only for old people. That faith is not only limited to the Holy Mass, but that it is also about joint activities, trips, camps. I think that this attracted me.

Did you always feel that in each community you joined, you found your place and you felt accepted?

Yes, especially in the second parish.

And later on?

The period spent in that community was rather long, up until my trip to Taizé. As I returned, I devoted my time to the Church aiding in pastoral work; I worked in a social service center. The following autumn, I joined the Franciscan friars.

What led you to choose this order?

I had friends among Franciscans. I knew about St. Francis beforehand. The simplicity I had experienced in the community life in Taizé was really appealing to me. St. Francis talks about simplicity, about being humble; he speaks of genuine love for God and your brethren. He does not speak about the hierarchical split among people. That is what I found most important.

Could you name the core experiences that were significant in the formation of your Christian identity? What was the main influence? What roles did the Scripture, community, and clergy play in it?

My Christian identity was formed from my personal experience and, as I have mentioned before, the big push came from the Taizé Community. The brothers of the community showed me that prayer could be completely different, that it does not have to be boring, that it can be simple, that few words of a chant may suffice, silence, a short reading – and that is it. And the idea that faith can be different really appealed to me – the idea that it does not have to be boring. You do not necessarily need a lengthy Mass and a sermon difficult to listen to; a short reading, a few chants, and even silence would suffice. This fills your space with God.

Could we then say that your core Christian experiences were derived there, through the community life?

Yes, especially through the Taizé Community. I found a completely different prayer life there, also a new understanding of Christian identity. I understood that Christians can be joyful, that they can be simple. The community founder Brother Roger was a real example for me.

What does Christianity give to you? Why the Christian faith?

I may sound boring, but Christianity gives you a living relationship with God; you may live with it day by day. Of course, you need to put forward some effort. You need to keep yourself awake so that you do not turn into a snoozing Christian. The Church is still alive, and what fascinates me most about it is the people. They come there with their different stories and different experiences. Many of my friends are Christians and this possibility to share the faith, to observe it in daily situations really appeals to me. It is hard to do so in secular Belgium. Yet the parish I visit still has quite some young people attending it.

Have you ever been disappointed in the Church?

I have some sort of negative experiences. I was disappointed in the Church. The Church is fallible because we are the Church. The Church is not some holy infallible cow. It is rather a living organism that makes mistakes. We are all people who make mistakes, but we try to learn from those mistakes and move on.

If you had to tell your story as Algirdas, as a contemporary Christian, how would you describe yourself?

I am a Christian, sometimes a doubting one, sometimes angry with my own Church. But still, I am Christian and I am happy that I am one. Jesus has an important place in my life; prayer helps me in tough moments, when I am angry and tired. Even in those moments, I still find that the Church is the right place for me.

Do you feel free in your Church? Do you feel that you can freely express your opinions according to your conscience?

Yes; moreover, opinions do change. The idea that the Church is a community is formed by people. People formed that opinion; it did not fall from the sky and surely God does not give it directly to people. The face of

the Church is changing constantly; it changes over time. You can be negative, but it depends on all of us.

I read the words of Pope Francis a few days ago and I liked them a lot. He has said that we cannot be Christians if we reject the Church. There is no Christian without the Church.

Reflection of a Lay Theologian about His Relation to the Church

Essay Written by Uncle, Poland
Translated from Polish into English
by Agnieszka Anna Ukleja

Key words: churching, belonging, sacrament of Baptism, sacrament of Communion, self-criticism, ordination of woman

I could use the words of Hans Küng who described himself as a critic who is in love with his Church. I feel the connection with the universal Church, perhaps even stronger than with the local one, because I visit my Polish parishes several times a year and most of the time I live abroad.

In Leuven, where I live, I am not a member of any particular community; I cultivate so-called ‘churching’. I go to different churches for various reasons, from the pragmatic ones (e.g. because of convenient timing) to the doctrinal ones (liturgy in some churches is over the top).

I have no problem with presenting my life story to others. I believe that my story is pretty average and there is nothing exciting about it. That is why I share it willingly with anyone who wishes to hear it. I do not lead a ‘double life’ when it comes to gaining the acceptance of the ecclesial community. I think this is due to several reasons: I rarely visit my parish in Poland; in my Leuven community, the ties are very, very loose. In terms of the ecclesial community understood as a community of the universal Church, I do not feel rejected or pushed aside. Normally, I sit in the last row of the pews in church, but either way, I’m inside the Church and the same concerns all members of the community.

I do not live in the sense that God accepts me and the Church does not. There is nothing more to add. Well, I think the recognition that God loves

me, but the Church does not usually take the first step towards moving away from any form of religiosity.

I do not lack any sense of community, because by nature I am a loner rather than a social butterfly. A community of two people is enough for me. I do not suffer from not experiencing the sense of community weekly. When it comes to the sacraments, on the one hand, I think that access to Baptism is too open, and I disagree with the fact that everyone can be baptized, even against their own will, e.g. baptizing babies. On the other hand, access to Communion seems to be too restricted and often too limited because of certain debatable factors. One gets the impression that Communion must be earned - while I think that Communion is primarily for those 'who are sick', and it can actually support one in leading a better life.

I do not feel frustrated by the fact that I do not have any influence on some issues in the Church. I am definitely more frustrated by the fact that I do not have any impact on how my money is handled by the State and on what it is spent. The difference is that you can always walk away from the Church, but you can never run away from paying taxes. I believe that the Catholic Church and interpretations of the Church are so broad that anyone who agrees with some of the basic doctrine of Christianity will find something that is acceptable for him or her.

Certainly, a few things can be considered the greatest 'sins' of the Church today. However, if I have to choose one - that would be the lack of willingness to think critically, which can be called 'a sense of infallibility'. This sickness affects all members of the Church. There's no question that a dogmatized doctrine does not give a sense of security; repeatable and predictable liturgy does not give a sense of stability; and a schematic everyday life and consequently, ordinary faith does not make it easy to organize your day, week, year. Of course they do. If members of the Church wished, at least from time to time, to pay attention to the fact that some practices are discriminatory for some members, the standard ecclesial community could be significantly improved. An example could be the ordination of women: The traditional argument against the ordination of women was that Jesus selected 12 apostles of which 12 were men. On the other hand, if we follow this reasoning, participation at the Mass should also be limited to men because they were the only ones who took part at 'the first Mass'. In addition, today, an argument of St. Thomas Aquinas that a woman is simply inferior to a man is rightly rejected and treated as unfair and unjust.

So, we can say that the reason why women are not ordained as priests

today is the fact that they never were in the past. This is an example of safe ritualization. If we follow the same line of thinking, we could say that the pope should not be using Twitter - he never did before 2012 - since he never used it before. I understand that the argument with Twitter is a trivial one, but I'm talking about the mechanism itself. The question implies a lack of authenticity of the Church in modern times. It is difficult to say whether the Church is authentic because we have no comparative material. What would She have to be in order to be more authentic? I think the problem here is an identification of the Church with some members whose sins are more visible than others are, such as greedy priests or dishonest wives and husbands. I think that the Church is authentic because Her founder is authentic and only because of Him has the Church survived so many centuries - even as a community of sinners.

*My faith is one thing and my personal problems are another thing,
and I do not tie them together*

A Married Woman Speaks about the Problem of Alcoholism in Her Family

Interview with Nadiya, Ukraine
Interview Held in Ukrainian and Translated into English
by Khrystyna Mykhaliuk

Key words: alcoholism, family, hopelessness, disorientation

Could you describe how your husband's problem of alcoholism has developed in the course of your family life, and did you know about it before you married him?

There was no evidence of it before the marriage. When we were dating, nothing indicated that in the future such a problem might appear. It started with small things, advanced gradually over the years, and has reached a critical point.

How long have you been married, and did you prepare for the marriage?

We have been married for twenty-five years. There was no preparation for marriage, because, at that time, our Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was underground. Therefore, our wedding took place secretly, at home, as it was a usual practice. There was no opportunity for preparation as it is practiced today.

Did you at least have some conversations with a priest before you married your husband? Did he warn you about the possible difficulties of a married life?

There was one conversation. I cannot remember clearly what it was about, but I am sure that it was not about my actual problem. As far as I can remember, he described in general how the family should live according to Christian principles, how the children should be educated in a religious spirit, etc. But he couldn't say anything more concrete. It was not an appropriate historical time in comparison with the current situation.

Do you have any bitter feelings about the Church because something was done carelessly?

I do not have any complaints about the Church in that regard. I am not sure how She could help me at all? My problem appeared later on.

Did your parents or your husband's parents raise this question before marriage?

No. Such a topic was not raised because they were very confident in my husband, that he would not do anything wrong. They were rather worried about his older brother. They did not hide anything from me. Also, before and after our wedding, everything was normal. There were no signs that he could fall into such a state.

When your problem just started to develop, did you ever turn to the priest who blessed your marriage for advice, or to other religious people? With whom did you share your feelings?

The priest who married us did not live nearby and we did not have contact with him afterwards.

I usually share my feelings with my sister. Our parents could see that something wrong was going on. When he was drunk, let us say, once a week at the beginning, I could complain to my mother-in-law about him. She always reacted and took my side. She instructed him, warned him not to behave in such a way.

Did she use religious arguments for this?

She used examples of other families to show how such behavior could influence the relationships in the family. I do not think that she referred to any religious arguments.

Were you, despite possible obstacles, a practicing believer during the first years of your family life?

At that time, there was no church in my village so we had to go to another village. When I was with my children when they were little, I missed the Liturgies more often. Later on, I would take turns in taking care of my children with my mother. But as soon as a parish church was built in our village and the children became older, I always went to church. The same is with my husband. He goes to church on a regular basis, every Sunday and other holydays. He believes in God.

How do you react if your husband misses the Liturgy because of being drunk or hungover?

Such incidents indeed took place and they resulted in arguments. I was angry that he missed the Liturgy so easily without a reason. But I am not even sure if he could hear me and get what I was saying to him in an intoxicated state. For that reason, maybe it didn't make sense to argue on those days. Nevertheless, I was angry and quarreled. Sometimes, I returned to this topic a day after the incident. I described to him how he looked and how he couldn't even wake up to go to church.

Can you notice any links between the development of your husband's alcoholism and some changes in your spiritual life and faith?

For me, my faith is one thing and my personal problems are another thing. I do not tie them together. However, sometimes, maybe subconsciously, I indeed ask why God allows this to happen to me. Sometimes, I think that this is my cross and maybe it is retribution for some of my sins.

Could we say that your faith is shaken now? Or, maybe, the contrary: Have you become more open to faith, or have you received more hope for a miracle?

For some reason, I do not believe in miracles.

But, let us imagine, if there is a pilgrimage site known for healings from alcoholism, would you go there?

I would like to go there and I would hope that it could help. I meant that I do not believe in miracles in the sense that problems cannot solve themselves.

Would you say that you are in a spiritual crisis, or 'crisis' is too strong a word?

As for the difficulty of the situation, maybe I shouldn't think of it in terms of a crisis because maybe, there are even worse family situations. But I do not want to compare my situation with worse examples.

I do not know how to characterize my spiritual state. Maybe depression is a more appropriate word. Sometimes, I cried and didn't want to live or to do anything. But after some time, such thoughts have disappeared; it depends on the situation. If there are some people with whom I can be open, they try to help me. They try to show me that there are sometimes even worse situations. At times, they speak about the positive traits of my husband, but it is not always helpful; sometimes, it irritates me.

Once, I asked my husband's sister to help me; I wanted her to come to my place with her husband, so that we could all sit together and they could talk to my husband, to influence him, to help him to understand his state. Maybe to hear this from them would make a difference, because when I say that he is an alcoholic, he doesn't believe me. Besides relatives, I do not know where to go.

But did you need anyone to work particularly with you, not with your husband?

To some extent, I feel that I need help. But it seems to me that if my husband admitted his addiction and changed his way of life I wouldn't need any help. If the problem disappeared – I would still feel bad for some time because the feeling of resentment accumulated in me. I am not saying that I would be a different person the very next day, but probably, I would change step by step. Maybe, from the beginning, I would play a role as if I am not confident at all in his change, in order to make sure that this is not just a temporary relief for a few days, and that afterwards, the problem would not come back again.

What are the measures your parish takes regarding alcoholics?

In our parish there is, during each Liturgy, a prayer for alcoholics. Sometimes, there are Liturgies devoted especially to this intention. There is a possibility to write an intention before the Liturgy and the priest mentions the name of an alcoholic you want to pray for.

I used to give this intention myself too. However, each time my husband heard his name read aloud, he was very angry. He is not the only person with this name in our parish. Nevertheless, he somehow feels that this is about

him. That is why he reacted in an aggressive way. A few times, he asked me: “Why are you doing this? You are making it worse!”

Are there any other practices?

There is an initiative of our parish priest: ‘The Book of Sobriety’. People make an oath not to touch alcohol for a chosen period of time. But my husband never participated in this initiative, not even for a short period of time to test his will-power. I put my name in this book during the period of Lent and offered this for my husband. Arguing that an oath could give him more motivation to keep himself within certain limits, I encouraged my husband to put his name in this book too. As far as I understood from one conversation with my husband, a priest suggested to him as well that he should try abstaining from alcohol for the shortest possible period, that is June 16-July 11, but he refused.

How does your husband explain his refusal?

I think that he does not have a strong will. He thinks that he is not able to pass this test and to keep his oath. It is better not to make an oath than to make it and then break it.

Would you like to take up this challenge again and offer it for your husband’s conversion or were you disappointed with it altogether?

Although I did it only once, I still consider it a good initiative. I wasn’t disappointed because I knew that such a small act couldn’t make an instant miracle happen and would not bring about the changes that I had expected. But I wanted to give it a go and I wanted to do at least this little something.

Maybe I am not religious enough, even though I know how things should be done and what the appropriate way is. Maybe I do not pay enough attention, due to the lack of time, or simply out of negligence. I cannot find suitable words to describe it. I feel that I do a lot in the areas of life other than the religious one. For instance, I initiate and finance various repairs and works in my house and my husband helps me out, but it is never his initiative and it seems like he is somehow forced to do it, without much enthusiasm. So, I took more responsibilities on myself. I think that it is always possible to find more time for religious practices, but somehow, and I don’t know why, I cannot succeed in doing it.

Does the priest adequately explain the conditions of being put in this 'Book of Soberness' and about making oaths? Do people have a comprehensive idea of it?

For example, before Lent, some information explaining what this book is about and what problems people face were given, but maybe it is not enough. Maybe a retreat is needed. There was a retreat devoted specifically to the problem of alcoholism, but it was on weekdays in the evenings. Many people couldn't attend because of work commitments. Maybe it would be better if such events took place on Sundays, when the majority of parishioners are present in church. Otherwise, only a few people benefit from it. I would also like it to happen more often and it would be good if some specialists were invited, especially from organizations that work with addicts.

To what extent do these initiatives involve family members of alcoholics?

There is nothing aimed specifically at people like me. All that we can do is give an intention and make an oath of soberness for a certain period as an offering.

What about personal conversations or visits by priests?

There are no such visits paid by priests. Of course, there is an annual visit after Christmas, but those visits usually happen during the day when adults are at work. The visits are not made by appointment.

Usually, people in need contact the priest themselves, but there is a kind of shame and reluctance on my part, because there is no hope. I feel that no one can help me in my situation; it is my problem, which I should solve by myself. I am reluctant to 'advertise' my problem once again. Anyway, I guess other people know about it regardless, unfortunately.

How about other people's opinions?

Our friends, neighbors, and other people in the village have a very positive opinion about him. They characterize him as a good person. Nobody, of course, praises his addiction. They feel sorry for him and wonder why it happened to him. He is kind towards others; he helps them, sometimes, even at his own expense.

Some people say that we have this problem because we allowed our relatives to build a small shop in our yard. Alcohol is sold there among other

things. There is a place to sit and to have a drink. Therefore, some people say that the wives of alcoholics curse our family and this is the reason why my husband has become more addicted in recent years.

I know that the priest tried to influence the people whose business is related to selling alcohol, but it is not effective because such people always find arguments to justify themselves. Of course, these attempts are necessary, but usually they aren't helpful. I once had such a conversation in a local shop. There was no outcome because, as I said, the person in charge of the shop had many arguments to justify her business and wanted me to look at the situation through her eyes.

Do other women like you discuss their problems among themselves?

I do not know for sure. Some women succeeded in convincing their husbands to start getting treatment. When I asked them for some practical tips, they shared them with me.

If there were any small groups of people like you who help each other and discuss these problems, would you join?

Well, I think that simply there is no one to organize it. And me? I do not know how people would perceive me in this role since it is extremely difficult for me to open up.

It seems that the only opportunity for you to discuss something with a priest is through Confession. Can you evaluate the priest's attitude towards you? Is the approach personalized enough, concerning the fact that you are the wife of an alcoholic?

He doesn't blame me; he listens to what I have to say and sympathizes with me. He tells me to pray. It might also be my fault that I do not go to Confession too often, so too many things happen in the meantime, and he cannot devote too much time to everything. Maybe he is forced to be very general.

What are the most typical spiritual dangers of being in a family like yours?

So, these are bad words... wishing that something bad would happen so that my husband would get himself together suddenly, although I feel that I cannot wish or even pronounce such a thing. But, if I am angry, I neither can

control myself nor my thoughts...

Do you feel that it gets worse with time?

Yes. This is especially true regarding bad language. I never used it before in my life. I understand that it is not an excuse and I have to pull myself together. I wouldn't like to behave as I am behaving at the moment. I have a feeling that every problem is enrooted in my husband's addiction. If he changed, everything would be different. And although we should repay good for evil, I usually return evil for evil. I cannot do otherwise.

Do you believe that family members may contribute to the alcoholism of some people, even unconsciously? Do you know something about it?

Maybe my fault is that I do not encourage my children to treat him more politely. He should understand it himself, but it doesn't happen. I do not know. Maybe I should react in a different way?

Which among the following strategies would be the most helpful for you if the Church organized some training: To teach you to control yourself more in the face of your problem; to give you more information about alcoholism, its reasons, its development, and treatment; or to become more sympathetic and indulgent towards your husband?

Every one of these three points would benefit my situation. Maybe the last one is the most important. I do not have compassion towards such people. I either do not understand them, or do not want to, or I cannot realize why a person who has an intellect can behave in such a way that his acts destroy a family, and affects his children adversely.

I cannot understand it. I cannot accept that alcoholism is an illness. Maybe I would like to know more about it. Maybe someone could explain to me how I should behave in such a situation, so that something would change. But, I mean, pity and sympathy vanish so easily, and you only become averse to such a person. If there is such a period when a person changes his mind for some time, then my bad emotions melt away a little bit, and I become milder, but anyway, it is difficult. I have such a character that it is so easy to hurt me and so difficult to receive my forgiveness. But my husband has never apologized for his acts; he has never begged for my forgiveness. He just waits until everything changes by itself.

Would you like to know more about how to support alcoholics in their families, or do you rather think this is a job of special institutions?

I am not sure if I would be able to understand the lives of alcoholics, to sympathize with them, or to help them. Maybe just out of curiosity, I would like to join some training, which teaches me to do so. But it is a painful topic for me.

Did you have any expectations towards priests or other religious people, which they did not succeed in fulfilling?

This has crossed my mind a few times. I want them to be more influential: They should run certain events and activities, invite specialists, psychologists, etc., and they should mention this problem in each homily.

How do you experience the sacramental dimension of your family? How about the promises that you gave one another in your marriage?

For me, marriage is a sacrament that lasts forever. There is a person that you chose by yourself; no one forced you to do this, so you just live with this person. Although my life is not a life that I ever dreamed about, I believe that it is a grace that I have normal, healthy children born in this marriage. I do not notice any bad inclinations in them for which I could be ashamed before other people.

Despite everything, I have never questioned the promise of faithfulness. I think that he loves me, but this love is... He thinks that it is enough to love but how he behaves doesn't matter. He doesn't consider it to be a sin. I do not question his feelings, but it is unpleasant. Maybe it is not enough; I do not know. Maybe it is because I am not sympathetic enough towards his state.

Have you ever considered getting an annulment of your marriage?

There were of course such thoughts of ending my marriage because of disappointment. But I said it to him just to frighten him. It is difficult to be a wife of an alcoholic. On one hand, it is impossible to reconcile with it, but on the other, the indissolubility of marriage is a fate you cannot avoid; it is something that you shouldn't rebel against. You just have to live with it.

Do you consider it a serious sin if marriages split because of

alcoholism?

[long pause] For sure, it is a sin, but I cannot say whether it is a serious or less serious one. And I cannot even express my attitude towards people who get divorced. But there are no reasons to judge them either. Because when an alcoholic refuses to change, you remain in sin all the time. Maybe it would be better if they separated. In this case, a woman could do her best to provide for the children, to try to live a more religious life... When you live with an alcoholic, you ask, beg, encourage him, but you do not see any results; maybe it is better to live separately? At least the children wouldn't hear all the shouting, foul language, and their state of mind wouldn't be damaged.

How does your problem influence your relationship with your children? How do you present their father to them?

At the very beginning, I tried to hide it from them a little bit. But in the course of time, I stopped defending him, so he appears before them in all of his 'beauty', as he is. I feel discomfort in conversing with my children. I would like to educate them in a different environment, not in such a family. There are too many things they witness, hear, know, or assume. It hurts me.

You have probably heard about the practice of annulment of marriage in a Church court, which is an allowed practice and is not counted as a sin.

Even if the Church allows it, I would be afraid of doing it. I would have some doubts about whether God allows it. The Church is always closer to people, whereas God is more serious about everything.

I am afraid that this 'annulment' is just one more example of a growing number of the Church's favors for people. The Church should rather work with people, explain and teach, even during one's early years in school, about the problem of alcoholism.

Do you feel your Church leaders adequately assist you in receiving more information about the teaching of the Church that may be relevant for you and about religious organizations and projects that can be of help? Does something at least reach you in the rural area that you live in?

Information about possible medical treatment can be found in magazines. Comprehensive information about alcoholism as such is not provided in our church. However, I do not know whether there is something organized in

neighboring parishes or anywhere else in the diocese. I am sure that it is the same for the vast majority of women from my village too.

Are there any general religious meetings with married couples, a kind of marital enrichment program, in your area, so that they could help you indirectly?

There is nothing like this; I would definitely go to such meetings, but I am not sure about my husband. I would propose it to him, but I cannot anticipate his reaction.

If during such a program, you would be asked to say something in a group, to share some personal experience, would you participate in it?

I do not know if from the very beginning I would be able to speak about my problem to strange people, even if they have the same problem. I am not accustomed to it; I would feel discomfort. Even if they were my neighbors or local villagers I would still feel some shame. This is a pity because after so many years together you naturally feel ashamed for your husband in front of other people who notice it. It is not that I am responsible. How can I be responsible for his alcoholism?

So, what is the role of faith in your life now?

The faith is very important for me. Its role in my life is that despite all these problems I do not fall down into some bad things. Without it, I would have probably become an alcoholic myself, have committed other horrible sins, have left my family, and wouldn't have worried about anyone or anything... But my faith somehow helps me to stay 'afloat', not to throw myself into the abyss, not to overlook certain spiritual values, although it is painful. I miss domestic warmth and coziness, understanding, compassion...

I thought all churchgoers were good and lived a good Christian life

A Lady Rediscovered Faith

Interview with Kristina, Croatia
Interview Held in Croatian by Tea Kovačić
Translated into English by Marijo Vukoja

Key words: cultural faith, conversion, Tomislav Ivančić, charismatic movements, the radical sanation of an invalid marriage, religious education for adults

Could you please tell me something about your childhood and youth? What did the Church mean to you at that period of your life?

When I was growing up, the State was ruled by a communist regime. At school, we were taught that God didn't exist and those who believed in Him were uneducated and primitive. At home, we rarely talked about religion. My parents didn't go to church on Sundays. However, my upbringing was traditional. Our house and parish church were on the same street. I attended catechism classes regularly and I received the sacraments. However, after Confirmation I stopped going to church and talking about faith. That's how my contact with the Church stopped. We still celebrated the holydays of Christmas and Easter at home, but nothing more than that.

How did the catechism classes influence your life?

Well, that was a time when I was very young. There were monks in our parish at that time, but all that what we learned from them was just 'a drop of water in a bottomless sea'. The things we learned at school influenced our life more. We didn't have a more comprehensive religious training at home either. Thus, I assume, it was the responsibility of our parents who were supposed to instruct us. But they didn't do it.

And later...

Nothing changed. The opinion that God doesn't exist prevailed... That's it.

And when did it change? How did it happen?

It happened because of some difficulties in my life.

How old were you when it happened?

I was 31. It was the wartime and generally, the situation for everybody was very difficult. But, I also had my personal problems in my family and in my marriage. I was looking for a way out of this situation.

Who helped you? Was it a religious community, family members, or someone else? Or were you alone?

I received support from churchgoers – believers who realized that I needed help and support. They taught me how to pray.

After I made my Confirmation, I never prayed because I had no interest in God or the Church. Therefore, once again, I had to learn all the prayers that I learned as a child and later forgot: Our Father, Hail Mary, and other prayers. I had to learn the responses for the Mass, and how to pray the rosary. I also attended the seminar of Tomislav Ivančić, where for the first time I learned something about faith and the sacraments...

Were these people from your parish community?

No. Since I wasn't a churchgoer, I knew nobody in the parish. These people who helped me were not such close friends of mine. They were acquaintances. Probably, God sent them.

What were the biggest difficulties in your first steps on your journey of faith?

Members of my immediate family created the biggest problems and difficulties for me. They didn't live like believers nor did they go to church, even though all of them received the sacraments in their childhood. When they noticed that I started going to church every day, was praying, and was reading the Bible, they started to create problems for me.

Were there any other problems apart from the lack of understanding from your family members? For example, were

there any problems in reconnecting to the sacramental life of the Church?

Yes. My husband wasn't interested in religion and he wasn't happy with this change. On the contrary, he was shocked and suspicious of why I suddenly started going to church.

When we first decided to get married, I wanted it to be a church wedding. Then, I didn't want to get married in the church because Matrimony is a sacrament. But because I received First Communion and made my Confirmation in the church, I thought that it was 'logical' to get married there as well. However, my husband was against it. So we only had a civil marriage.

Only after my conversion did I understand the meaning of the sacrament of Marriage, and I wanted to get married in the Church. This sacrament was also a condition for the sacrament of Confession and I hadn't confessed since my Confirmation when I was 14. It was quite a long period without Confession in which there were many difficult situations... Since I became aware of my sins and the 'improper' way in which I was living my life up to that moment, suddenly, I got a strong desire to go to Confession. But I couldn't because my husband didn't want to get married in the Church although there was no hindrance - he received all necessary sacraments too. I tried to convince him to marry me in the Church in every possible way but I didn't succeed. He simply didn't want to do it.

How did you deal with this situation? What did you try to do, with whom did you speak to about this?

I prayed the rosary every day. I just believed that God would help me. And that's what happened. My colleague saw my intense desire to go to Confession and she told me that despite my husband's refusal to get married in the Church, I could be permitted to go to Confession and receive other sacraments too. She advised me to go to a priest that she knew personally in another parish. She already had talked with him about my problem and he said that he would help me to write a request in my name.

I had to collect all the necessary documents for my husband and me. Since it was in the post-war time, and my husband was not born in Croatia, it was not so easy. However, with God's help, this was resolved and our marriage was convalidated through 'the radical sanation of an invalid marriage'.¹

After that issue was resolved, were there any other difficulties in

your journey of faith?

My problem was that I was a convert and I needed religious training, for example, religious education for adults, reading the Catechism of the Catholic Church, etc. My first steps were associated with simple believers. They went to Mass and to Confession regularly. However, they didn't know much about the faith and for me everything was new. I lacked having the right foundations.

***How did you learn the most important things about the faith?
Was there anyone to help you or did you learn it all by yourself?***

At that time, I went to church regularly and when I was pregnant, I went to church almost every day. I listened to sermons and read a lot and that's how I learned about the faith. However, those who were close to me, who were believers and churchgoers, recommended some literature to me that was more about private revelations. The dominant theme in that literature was the fear of evil, frightful stories about Satan and sins. In those books, there was no place for God's love. Reading such literature incited the sense of guilt and fear in me because of my previous sins and the life that I led before.

So, this is how my initial steps looked like. There were many wrong decisions and errors, but the growth in faith is gradual and it takes a lifetime.

I am very thankful to my friend who often went to church and who instructed me. But it could have been even better if instead of her there had been someone else who accompanied me on my way, perhaps, a priest or a nun, or if there had been organized religious instruction for adults. These first steps were very important.

How did all of these issues affect your personal faith? Have you lost faith?

Oh, no! Despite all these difficulties, I haven't lost my faith. There were much bigger difficulties in my life than those.

At first, I thought that all churchgoers were good and lived a good Christian life. However, I soon realized that that's not always the case. I had confidence in the people who were going to church, and only later did I realize that some of them go astray, or that they are not mentally stable. Some of them also had alleged private revelations. Then I realized how important it is for people like me to be instructed by a priest or a nun. If someone who only goes to church every day instructs you, but he or she doesn't know

anything about the faith, then you never know what might happen.

Did you ever feel marginalized in your parish community, as if you didn't belong there?

Yeah, I never felt that I belonged within my parish. I always preferred friars.

You mean communities led by friars?

Yes. I feel as if I am more attached to those communities. In my parish, it wasn't possible. I joined a prayer group. Today, I think that a priest should have been present there. But in our parish that would never happen.

In my town, there are several religious orders and I feel more connected to them. My spiritual director is a Franciscan. I also have contact with Jesuits. But I have no contact with my parish.

You consider yourself a member of the Church; you participate in the sacramental life and strive to build your spiritual life. How did you manage to reconcile your personal faith in God and your feeling of being marginalized within your parish community?

I don't know... We are fortunate that in our city there are more religious communities. I feel a connection with my parish, but I don't go to my parish church on Sundays.

Now?

Yes, now. But in the beginning, I just didn't feel like I could get what I needed at that moment from my parish. That was, for example, the prayer community, retreats, pilgrimages, and private spiritual conversations with a priest when I had hard times... I could only find all of that outside of my parish, with the Franciscans.

Did you feel accepted there?

Yes. But I can't argue that I'm not accepted in my parish. I just do not find a proper place for myself there. Besides, our parish priest isn't the person to whom I could go to in order to ask for advice. I just don't feel that; I find what I need elsewhere. In my opinion, my parish isn't open enough and I can't find what I need there.

Do you think that there is lack of proper pastoral care in the

Church and that a different pastoral practice could change the situation in your parish?

Yeah, exactly. Many things depend mainly on the parish priest. One priest can do a lot. He can initiate and accomplish many things. I do understand that my parish is large and our parish priest doesn't have a chaplain. Therefore, I have no intention to criticize our parish priest. However, I just cannot find what I need for my spiritual life there. I need a priest who can be my spiritual director, with whom I can talk whenever I need to talk, and to whom I can say my Confession once a month.

By the way, just recently, my spiritual director was relocated to another city and I'm looking for a new one.

I don't know. Maybe I can do something for my parish. But what? I have no idea what I can do.

How do you see your place in the Church then? How would you describe your faith?

My place in the Church... apart from going to Mass... I can't join the parish choir. There are people who have been in the choir for a long time and those things shall not be changed. Therefore, I am only a believer who goes to church, other rituals and celebrations, retreats...

Have you ever thought about getting involved in some other activities apart from the sacramental life of the Church?

Sure, I was thinking about actively getting involved, but there is my family... I don't have support from my husband, and there is resistance from my family in everything that I do. In the very beginning, I was confronted by my family whenever I would go to church. When they asked me: "Where are you going?", I would avoid giving a precise answer otherwise, they would complain and argue. The same thing happened when I went on pilgrimages. My occasional absences created increasing agitation and scolding at home. Therefore, there is nothing more I can do for now.

Are you raising your children as believers?

My husband doesn't stop the children from going to church, attending religious education, and being raised as believers by me. However, he doesn't participate in it either. Encouraged by experience and my life, I decided to teach our children from an early age about the faith, Church, and God. They

can't live without faith.

Recently they received the sacrament of Confirmation. Generally, it would mean that they should say 'Goodbye' to the Church and Mass...

Do you think that it is part of the mentality of our people?

Unfortunately, yes. When you receive all of the sacraments then everything is completed. My husband said this to my children too. But thanks to God, my children are well-educated, not only at home, but they also have religious education at school. They know everything and I don't have to push them. Now, I can learn something from them as well.

Do you think that this might be a chance to catch up on what you missed in your faith journey?

Yes! It is a process and it lasts for a long time. Now, since I'm older, it is a little bit different. There were some negative experiences in the past, but God doesn't allow anything to happen if it is not for our own good and it is indeed so. Therefore, in those bad experiences - where there may be deviations, or arrogance in thinking that you know a lot of things - God always leads us, so we might learn something.

What motivates you to continue to be part of the Church in spite of everything? Many people who have encountered such obstacles as you turned away from God and maybe gave up.

I cannot imagine my life without the Church.

What do you mean exactly? You cannot imagine your life without the Church as a community or without faith in God?

I would never want to go back to living my previous life when I lived without faith. I always say to my children: "One day I'll not be around here with you, but keep your faith in God. God will always be with you." It is my only wish that my children remember this.

Is the faith, i.e. your personal faith in God, the biggest reason for your decision to remain in the Church?

Yes. I can't imagine living without the Church, the sacraments, the regular attending of Holy Mass - Eucharist, Confession, prayer. Without it, it is impossible to live.

Translator's Notes:

¹ Can. 1161.

A Young Catholic Found what He was Looking for in a Protestant Community

Interview with Ati, Hungary
Interview Held in Hungarian and Translated into English
by Richárd Papp

Key words: traditional faith, searcher, relation with parish priest, catechism classes, relation with Protestant pastor, conversion

How is your family connected to the Catholic Church, and what was your relationship to the Church from childhood on?

The first thing I can remember from my childhood was the catechism class in the first grade of primary school. It was not mandatory, but my parents wanted me to go, so I went. I cannot recall any Catholic influence in my upbringing prior to that, although, all members of my family are Catholics. They live in a small village in a close knit community. They went to church on holydays and they sent their kids to Sunday school, preparation for the sacrament of Confirmation, and similar events. My parents were not regular churchgoers and they did not insist on me going either.

I didn't really like Sunday school. I 'played hooky' and finally my parents decided to withdraw me. I did not understand most of the things taught there. The only things that I can remember from those lessons are a couple of stories from the Bible.

Religion came back in to my life later when I was attending high school in Eger, a town in North-Eastern Hungary, when I started to show interest in Christianity. Thanks to my Biology teacher I started to investigate, after all, if God does exist. There was a lesson on the theory of evolution, but it was

obvious that he did not quite agree with that theory. I wanted to understand that better so I started talking with him. My school was not a Catholic school and the teacher was not a believer either. However, he believed that perhaps there was something more, behind what he had to teach. This was enough for me to start thinking about these things. From then on, I decided to investigate everything and not to reject God without investigating whether He existed.

Thus began my years of searching. At first, I was searching on my own. I imagined various images of God. I prayed too, according to my memories from childhood. I put my hands together and stuff like that. I was sure that if there was a God and if He was the Creator, then He was omnipotent. And if God was omnipotent, then He would hear my prayers. After this, whatever I prayed for, it started to happen. God started to convince me about His existence.

By the time I reached the 11-12th grade, I was convinced that God did exist. This was no longer a question. The only thing left for me to do was to get in closer contact with Him. Naturally, since I had no other knowledge, I reached out to the Catholic Church.

Once I met a girl from my village on the bus. I knew that she was going to church and she told me about a Catholic youth group that was led by a priest. Young people got together there to talk about all sorts of things. This is how I got involved in the Catholic community. Around that time, my preparation for the sacrament of Confirmation started. I was really happy because I felt that I could get deeper into all this. I was baptized, but I was not officially admitted in to the Church, and I felt it would make much more sense if I went through the official preparation process. Attendees of the Confirmation preparation were of the 7-8th grade, much younger than me. However, instead of the youth group meetings, I began to attend only the preparation. The youth group activities were halted during that time anyway.

All the while, I was serious about forming a personal relationship with God. I wanted to learn everything about Him and through Him about the world and myself in it. It became evident to me that if He created the world, then He knows everything about it including me in it. I knew there were things one could find out only through Him. I wanted to get to know myself too, through Him. Also, to know who He is or what He is. The idea, if He created me, then I must be His, formulated in my mind. Actually, this had already crystallized in my mind. But the question remained: How do I deepen

this relationship? As it happened, the Confirmation preparation served this purpose.

What was the priest's personality like? How would you describe your relationship?

When I got to the youth group, and decided to enroll myself for Confirmation preparation, the priest was glad. He was a stocky guy, young and friendly. A person you cannot dislike. Although, I had a feeling that he did not take things too seriously. I trusted him anyway. After all, who else could I trust? He was the only priest that I knew. In Eger, where I was attending school, I used to go to pray in the cathedral. At Christmas time, I saw the Archbishop there, but he felt so distant to me. So, the priest was the only one I knew; therefore, I trusted him.

I don't remember much about the youth group. I was there once or twice. I noticed that some of the attendees of the youth meetings were not concerned with God. They were sent there or they went there because that's what was expected of them. There were few who came from Catholic schools. They already knew more than the rest did.

The priest said that the only requirement in order to make it to Confirmation was to bring our Bibles to the gatherings. So I gladly brought my Bible. However, the strange thing was that we did not even open the Bible. Instead we were handed the Catholic Catechism in which, in the form of questions and answers, all was explained, all that was in the Bible which we never even opened.

Instead of studying the Bible, we had to memorize what was in this booklet. In class, we had read it out loud. Then we were assigned ten pages we had to learn by next time. I wanted to learn about God, but instead, this is what we got. Guys in the group discussed parties and various mischiefs with which they kept the priest occupied. The priest had to pay attention to them, but the truth is he did not seem to insist on being more serious either. I am telling you the truth. I didn't see the desire in him to teach us something.

The only person who seemed to be interested in learning about God was one girl. She was attending a Catholic school. I moved and sat next to her and started to talk to her. The rest of the class then decided that we were a couple. That made me upset because that was not the case at all. I only wanted to talk to her because I saw that she really cared about God unlike the rest who were

there only because their parents sent them there. After this, the whole thing lost its credibility, and I began to lose interest.

Did you also start having problems with Catholicism as a whole then?

My problem was that the whole thing seemed so distant. It was difficult to reach the priest, because he was involved in the Caritas organization. Also, he had to go from church to church to celebrate the Eucharist. I began to attend the Eucharist but that felt distant too. The only time a layperson could get closer to what was happening up there was when either the members of the youth group went there to read a section from the Bible or if someone was an acolyte. Even those had only insignificant roles. The service was always the same. The priest always repeated the same thing. His sermon was brief, felt like following the same pattern always. The cantor had a terrible voice. Only those who had a hymnal could follow him. Even the songs felt so distant.

It was the culmination when I felt that those people were not concerned with God. They only cared about customs.

One day the priest offered me a lift back home from the gathering. There were also other people in his car and I was the last one to be dropped off. When it came to me getting out, I told him: "I thought I would try to investigate if there is a God and how the whole thing works, but now I really would like to get serious about it, go deeper into my relationship with God, and know more about it than an average person does." He did not say anything. I only heard a little chuckle. That felt like an insult. My jaw dropped as I got out of his car. I asked myself, "What was that?" Then I realized that this was not good at all.

As I said, the priest had chuckled and I found that to be unbelievable. After all, who else would care about this if not a priest? If a priest finds this funny, then... I got laughed at in the student house more than once. Who cares? But if a priest laughs...? This is when I started to think, that if I still wanted to get deeper into my relationship with God, I had to do something else. As you can see, I did not give up.

Catholics can be divided into two categories; this is overly simplified, but this is the way I see it. One group consists of the average folks who go to church; the other is made up of those who serve. Who are those who serve? Those are priests. Should I become a priest? – I asked myself. A priest leaves

everything behind, devotes his life to serving; for all practical purposes, he leads a sequestered life. In addition, there is celibacy. I did not want to remain single. I could not fathom why God would want me to be unmarried. If He created man and woman, why would He want that? Then I thought that I had missed that already because those who were to become priests had gone to Catholic school to have that kind of upbringing and I did not have that. I did not find these options compatible with what I wanted anyway. But then what were my choices? I could go to church, but that would not mean that I would have communion with God. I could not see the connection or transition between these. Then what was I to do? I did not want to let go of God.

After the priest laughed at me, I never again touched upon the subject with him. If he thought it was laughable, why should I approach him again? He never brought it up again either. He missed quite a few of the communion preparation classes, for he had to be elsewhere. We only saw him at the Eucharist.

In spite of all these situations, how did you become a faithful Christian? How and why could your faith flourish in another denomination?

Around that time, I got to know one of my dormitory teachers. I had known him for four years already, but only as my teacher. I did not know that he was a pastor as well. I remember clearly: One day I was making a phone call near the dorm and after I hung up, I headed back in and there he was, the guard on duty. I overheard him talking in his office to someone about the Bible. I stopped by and I turned to him. With that, the guy he was talking to turned his back on him; he was more stubborn about these things and then the teacher started talking to me. I quickly discovered that he knew a lot about the Bible and could talk about it with credibility.

What did this credibility mean to you?

It meant that I could have a personal conversation with him. If I had a question, he did not laugh at me. He did not lose his bearings. His answers were always based on the Bible. He was open, personable, and everything he said he could support with teachings from the Bible. I trusted the Bible even then. Even if the priest never encouraged me to read it, as a Christian, I knew the Bible had great importance. And this teacher, if he did not know something, he would say so. Then we opened the Bible and looked for the

answer together. It meant a great deal to me that I could sit down with him, discuss things with him, and clarify all those thoughts and feelings stirring in me.

For example: I told him that I could feel that I am not only a body. I felt that my being is comprised of two parts: body and soul, as if my psyche was separate from my body. He said that I was right, but suggested we look this up in the Bible too. And he showed me that a human being is actually comprised of three parts. Using examples from the Bible, he showed me that a man has not only a body and a soul but also has a spirit. This was such an event, something that never happened before. He showed me the deeper meaning of the Scripture by quoting words of the original text from the Bible.

He said that the old Hungarian translation of the Bible contains the word Holy Spirit ('Szentlélek', written as one word). But this is incorrect. This is supposed to be two separate words. If we look at the English version, we find two words: 'soul' and 'spirit'. In the Hungarian translation, both are translated as 'soul'. There is only one verse where the word 'spirit' is being used. So, he said, I do have a soul and spirit too. And this was the best explanation of how I could connect with God. That is through my spirit. To the material world I connect with my soul, while to God with my spirit. This was awesome. Prior to this, no one talked to me about having a spirit and a soul. So, we talked about these sorts of things when he was on guard-duty. I sat by him and we talked for hours. So it happened that in a few days with his help, I had discovered a lot more than I had during weeks and months at the Catholic parish. As we continued our conversation, more personal things came up. I mentioned my issue with the Catholic Church. And that is when one more thing happened. That made him seem very much different from the people that I had come across in the Catholic Church, and this totally convinced me. This is when I saw that he really had a personal relationship with God, and the Spirit of God, the strength of God was in his life and in his soul.

Not only can we pray to God, but God can also send us messages. He can talk to us and all those gifts, the prophecies are not only a matter of the Old Testament, belonging to the past. God never changes. He never goes back on His words. All these parables are accessible to us too. And we don't have to suffer since Jesus died for us on the Cross. He was sacrificed for our sins, sins that separate us from God. So, if we believe in Christ, the power of God can work in us directly. And through that, we receive these gifts. And we don't receive those the same way as the Prophets did, turning our back on the

world all together. Christ died for us, so the power of God can work in us and in me too.

The big question remained: How can I live up to God's expectations? How can I become a better person? How can I shed those things that I can see being wrong, yet they are part of me, part of my being? I talked to him about that too. I was such an egoistic, obtrusive person in those days. I walked over anyone, imposed my ideas without thinking that I was being detrimental to others. I did recognize this as being wrong, but also that it was part of my personality. And I did not know how to get rid of it.

And I had these things with women. I knew that was not right either. I used to go out with those who already had boyfriends. I knew about the boyfriends, still I went out with them. At the same time, I felt terrible about it. This was nothing extreme. From the outside, it even looked cool, but I knew, this was not going to cut it with God. Yet, I could not change.

And then I talked with my teacher about it. He explained that I didn't have to fight it out, because Jesus had died on the Cross. He paid the price for my sins. He suffered the consequences for all these sins and died for them. The Scripture says that Jesus had nailed these sins to the Cross. I have nothing more to do but to accept that by the grace of God I don't have to suffer for them. God will give me strength to step over them, to leave them behind. And this was the turning point when I actually could believe that indeed, God could have a personal relationship with me and I didn't have to struggle to live up to Him. I have to have the desire for the struggle in my heart; I have to accept it and perhaps, I have to say it out loud, confess it to someone, but not in such a way as we do it in Confession.

Confession was a strange thing to me. I never went to Confession because I was afraid to confess. To go to Confession and let the priest know everything about me? No way. Everyone knew that the priest knew everything about everybody. That was not good. I had no courage to go to Confession, to speak to the priest about my personal issues. Before Confirmation, I would have to go to Confession and this was a major struggle for me.

I had to learn to think that Christianity does not exclusively belong to the Catholic Church. And there were those dogmas that say that the only Church that teaches the Bible the right way is the Catholic Church. The Catholic

Church is infallible. This was something that already upset me. What do they mean that it is infallible? It is written in the New Testament that the one who claims that there is no falsity in him is deceiving himself. My teacher pointed out this and many other misconceptions like it. What gave credibility to his words was that he showed all this is in the Bible. He showed me those verses in the Bible that contradict the Catholic Church. In the meanwhile, the connection to the Catholic Church was still alive in me. It was a slow process to change that.

Essentially, I learned nothing about God at the preparation classes. On the other hand, when I talked with my teacher, the information was overwhelming. On top of that, he never told me that I should leave the Catholic Church, or else... Ever since I stopped attending the preparation classes for Confirmation, I did not even dare to talk to the priest. I could tell that they did not approve of me opening up to other Christian dominations. They made me recognize that. Only once did I ask the priest why there are more books in the Catholic Bible than there are in the Protestant one. He immediately realized that I knew things I was not supposed to know, and responded that it is so because there are people who would not accept the thousand year old tradition of the Catholic Church. Well, that wasn't a good enough answer for me. It only left me hanging. Thousand year old tradition? What about the foundation, the Bible? I expected him to prove his point with the Bible, not with reference to traditions. This is like celibacy: I already learned that it was only because of secular reasons, not because it was in the Bible; it did not come from God.

In short, my teacher did not insist that I should leave the Catholic Church. He said that he could see a commitment towards God was forming in me. He was hoping that I would have a true relationship with Him, but he felt I wouldn't find that through the Catholic Church. Other than that, he left it up to me.

In the meantime, my teacher started a Bible study class in the dormitory. It was only three of us: he, myself, and another guy. We had conversations and prayers. This was very good. We did not mechanically say the well-practiced prayers as we did at the catechism lessons. Instead, we used our own words and our prayers were not only to the Virgin Mary. This was one of my other dilemmas: I found it strange that Catholics pray ten times as much to Mary than to God. My teacher also pointed out that Mary was a human being too. What the Catholics built around Mary does not come from God. It is not

based on the Bible.

This small Bible-circle was honest and humane. That brought God closer to me. If I want to be in close contact with Him, God does not insist that I turn away from everything like technology, science, engineering, etc. Now, I am studying to be a mechanical engineer, not a priest. Yet, I have a personal relationship with God and I do hope to know God more intimately than the priest does. I do read the Bible and I do understand its message. God speaks to me too.

My teacher was the pastor of a charismatic Protestant community. So, I started going there. There were prayer gatherings at one family's place. They held it on Wednesdays, and I was able to attend. I started to get to know the people and realized that they had personal relationships with God too. This group was like a small sized class. The atmosphere was family-like even though there were all sorts of different people. So, it was familial and everyone lived by the Bible. Their connection to God was their everyday reality. On Saturdays, they had their services, which were also very sincere and family-like. I also observed that those miracles the Bible talks about like healing of the sick really do happen.

Well, what I really had to digest was that the miracles of Jesus work in people's lives. From then on, God started to work through me too. There was no question about it and it was clearly convincing. Seeing the power of God was totally different from what was happening in the Catholic Church. Finally, I decided to belong to this community. It was not easy. Many things were strangely different, but I accepted those differences because all that diversity happened according to the Bible. All was sincere. Everyone took part in the service. There was not such a distance like there was at the catechesis. I learned to like this community. I still join them every Saturday even though I now live in Budapest. I go home to my parents and on Saturday, I go to Eger for the service.

Have you had any conflict with your family or anyone else because of this?

When I first started going there, at home they flipped out about it. Earlier, I used to go to a Catholic church. That was fine for them. Then, it turned out that I was attending different services. They did not even let me go at first, but I went anyway. The whole family was concerned that I would join a sect.

They were serious about it. It lasted for months. They were very concerned about my future. Now, they no longer contest it. They even accompanied me a few times. They still can't understand why my plans have changed; earlier, I wanted to go to the United States, but they are glad that my life is in order. There was no conflict with anybody else. As I said, I have not talked with the priest again.

Can you envisage yourself returning to the Catholic Church?

What I can imagine is: I won't separate myself from those who belong to the Catholic Church. I do have a friend from the youth group with whom I still maintain close contact. However, I cannot imagine returning to the Church. They cannot give me answers to anything that would make it worthwhile giving up the relationship I now have with the Living God.

If a close acquaintance invited me to his or her wedding at the Catholic Church, I would attend, of course. I wouldn't say: "Leave me alone, I'm not joining you or going near the church" or anything like that. I am not stupid. I am a Christian.

PART II -
Problems with Teaching, Moral,
Law, and Discipline of the
Church

A Testimony of a Catholic Homosexual Person about Life, the Church, and Happiness

Interview with Mario, Slovenia
Interview Held in Slovenian and Translated into English
by Matej Purger

Key words: faith, pastoral work, family, child, catechesis, identity, homosexuality, official teaching of the Church, spirituality, priest, vocation, tolerance

Do you know that feeling when you encounter a human being in such a way that you can feel the beauty of life?

No?

It goes something like this.

Mario, how are you? How was your day?

I'm fine, thank you. At work, it is a little bit stressful because we are in the middle of the selection process of a new co-worker. At the same time, our organization is preparing a new series of events that will take place throughout Slovenia. Every year, there is another theme. This year, the theme is slightly more provocative, namely 'jump out'. We want to provoke people to jump out of the patterns of passivity, their comfort zones, out of some patterns that can be very negative in Slovenia.

What drives you in life? What is your passion? What makes you happy?

Meeting people makes me happy. For example, I am helping our parish priest and through this engagement, I get in touch with a lot of people. Even when I work as the sacristan and take care of the church, I meet people.

Those encounters enrich me. On the other hand, I like quietness, peace, solitude, especially in the mountains or when jogging.

What does the relationship with God and the relationship with the Church mean to you? Are these two relationships distinct from one another? How do you see this?

I think that there is no Christianity without the Church. Could someone who says that he or she believes in God and does not believe in the Church have a relationship with God? Perhaps. But in this way, he or she somehow denies the relationship with the fellow human being, which is exactly carried out in the Church.

I believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that He established the Church as a community with a certain purpose. In my opinion, the main purpose of the Church, above everything else, is to administer the sacraments. The sacrament is always administered by someone else, by a fellow human being. There is a certain complementarity. Personal faith, which is necessary, thus deepens and grows. Man's personality enriches itself primarily in the relationship with God, but on the other hand, also in the relationships with fellow humans that are equally important, and through the sacraments.

So you are saying that the relationships with the Church and with God are intertwined?

Yes, I do not distinguish between the two of them. As I have already said, there are many levels but I would not say that they are separated from one another.

Could you tell me something more about the search of your identity? When did you discover that you were different - and, if I may ask, how is it that you are different?

You probably mean my homosexual orientation?

Yes.

So, every human is in his or her own way different from the other. I realized in puberty that I am different... I couldn't speak about it with anybody at home and therefore I kept it more or less to myself.

Fortunately, at that time, at the end of high school, there were two very good chaplains leading the youth group. Time spent in the youth group and

my relationships with others shaped me significantly and strengthened my faith. Eventually, I opened up for the first time and confided myself in Confession to the chaplains about being different. After that, I gradually told my friends. Later, I took another step and said it at home. That was pretty difficult.

How did your family accept it?

It was difficult. My father was completely... On the one hand, my parents were surprised; on the other hand, my father was disappointed. His world had collapsed. After that, we didn't communicate almost for half of the year. I was looking for contact with him, but he just ignored me. Later, my mother's illness contributed to us getting closer again. Gradually, and with time, our relationship has gotten better and better.

The concrete topic, that I am different, was never discussed much. We don't talk about it now either. However, despite that, there is a certain kind of tranquility. I am at peace because my parents know who I am. They are probably at peace too, because they know that I confided in them, even if their son did not follow the path they had imagined or perhaps wished for. I do think and believe that they love me no matter who I am.

It is interesting. You felt accepted first in your parish, if I understood you correctly?

Yes, even though I did not say it openly to everybody there. But it is true; I started opening up in the parish. If I didn't have this experience from the youth group and all those conversations and encounters there - because we talked with each other and the chaplain also spoke to me about personal matters - if I did not have that or had not experienced it, I would not have had the courage for the steps I later took.

Wonderful! As I understand it myself, that is not a regular practice in the parishes. In a certain way, it seems like a blessing.

I don't know what it looks like in other parishes. Not everything is good here either. For example, in our parish there are only 17 kids in all nine grades of primary school who attend catechesis. Ten years ago, there were more than 100. It's really a disaster. In this parish, the situation is really bad.

How do you remember your high school transformation? How did your homosexual orientation influence your view of the

world, of yourself, and others?

Above all, that discovery compelled me to think about what it means and how I should define my relations with others, with the world, and with God.

There was a period when I skipped catechesis for about six months. I think that it was in 5th grade. I do not know if it was due to my discovery of being different or whether there was another reason. I didn't tell anything about it at home. Maybe, I felt isolated, disconnected from my peers. However, the definitive switch had happened in that youth group in high school.

In your opinion, how does the Catholic community face and accept this kind of difference compared to other social groups? How was it before you were an adolescent and how is it now?

Well, back then, I had not talked about it publicly. Only a few people knew about my homosexuality and for others, I was just normal. I was mostly influenced by my inner experience. Because I hadn't expressed it publicly nor did I behave differently, people probably thought: "When is he going to find a girlfriend? Get married?"

I was dealing with this and other similar expectations. I was thinking a lot, and I was struggling within myself trying to find a proper way to reveal to others that I was different. It might have been otherwise if my character was different. Maybe, I could have told it in a joking manner.

However, I can say that, in general, I have always felt like I was accepted. Even today, since I have decided to speak publicly about it, I am not noticing negative reactions. At least, I do not notice it.

Okay, I am ignoring anonymous comments on the internet. A parish priest once told me that there was a lady wondering what it all means and we decided that we'll talk about that at the parish pastoral council. In that way, an interesting and honest debate occurred, which I really liked. People were talking openly and said what they thought, even if their views were very different from mine. But we talked about it and it was no longer a taboo about which we should not be talking.

In my opinion, if there were other Christians who were in a similar situation, and if they were a little braver, they would be equally well received. The problem arises when you mention homosexuality to an 'average Catholic'; he or she first sees the negative image, which is mainly associated with the disorder. So, if an 'average Christian' does not have any contact with

a homosexual man, he or she will also build his or her position on the negative media images in the future. Nothing else could be expected.

Do you think a Catholic person has an advantage in his understanding over others or not? It is generally held that Catholic social conservatives have difficulties in accepting otherness. Your experience tells us exactly the opposite and that is very nice to hear! Why am I saying this? One of the meanings of the word 'catholic' is 'universal'. That suggests that Catholics are open to otherness. On the other hand, there is also Christ's commandment of love.

That is true. And it seems to me that with Pope Francis, the acceptance of a fellow human being got an even greater emphasis, even if we are talking about a sinner or somebody different from the majority. On the other hand, it is also true that the teachings in this area are very clear.

What do you think about that doctrine?

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, it says that any sexual act between persons of the same sex is not allowed; it is sinful.

How do you feel when you read this?

When I first read it, I was wondering what the Church says regarding homosexuality. Within Christianity itself, there is a very wide range of positions, from those extremely conservative who advocate killing homosexuals to those who, in the context of Protestant Churches, say that everything is all right and they even bless such relationships.

Since I am Catholic myself, I was mostly interested in what the Catholic Church has to say about it. When I read passages of Scripture, such as Paul's letters, I was very interested to know exactly what a certain word means in Greek and I also read theological articles. Sometimes, I wondered why the Church holds such rigid views on this issue. Why it is not allowed for two people of the same sex to live together if they love each other, including their sexual dimension? However, when I go more deeply into things, I come to the realization that the path of the Catechism is the right one, in a sense. However, I do not know.

In a certain sense, could it also mean self-denial?

It could be.

How do you combine these two conflicting positions: On the one hand, accepting yourself as a homosexual person and on the other hand, accepting the Church's teachings that categorize homosexual acts as sinful?

Today at Mass after Communion, we sang a famous song about Jesus' words: "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Mk 8:34) I guess that the meaning of this is clear. The Church offers teachings that are older than 2,000 years and they are verified. Who should I trust more now? Finally, it is also connected with personal happiness. Even with personal fulfillment.

What do I want to say? I am afraid that if I only follow my homosexual inclination I would not be happy. That is what I have experienced in the relationship that I had. I can't be happy in such a relationship because I do not know how I could reconcile that relationship with Church teachings. When I was in a relationship, I was cut off from sacramental Communion.

I was honest with myself and I was not going to Communion when my life was not in accordance with the Church's teachings. Then I realized that my thorough attachment to the Church is more important to me than my partnership. This, however, does not mean that my homosexual inclination has gone away. A desire to be with someone and the desire for intimacy is still present. I face those desires and struggle with them more or less successfully. I think that each of us has his or her own struggles, married and ordained persons alike. Nevertheless, I do not claim that I am more disadvantaged or that I suffer more in this world because I am different. However, I would feel disadvantaged were there groups of people in society who would verbally or physically attack homosexuals. But I do not have such experiences.

It is evident that the Church means a lot to you. Where would you say that your place in the Church is?

I was thinking about the priesthood.

A strong spiritual dimension can be sensed within you...

Yes, spirituality is close to my heart. By nature, I'm more of an introverted person. I contemplate a lot. At a certain stage of life, when I had less contact with the people around me and there were no opportunities for conversations, I turned to prayer and dialogue with God. This is the reason why I am happy about being different. If I was not different, I would never

experience any spiritual growth.

Allow me to correct my question a little: Where would you wish to have your place in the Church?

I am still searching for a concrete place. Since I was seriously and vigorously thinking about priesthood, I asked to join the Society of Jesus. But the admission procedure into the Society is very long. First, the candidate has to go through four interviews with members of the Society. Then, there is a conversation with a psychologist. I, myself went through this procedure two times, because I had waited another year in between, following the instructions of the provincial. After one year, the provincial made a final decision that I was not an appropriate candidate.

What was the reason for such a decision?

The reason was my homosexual orientation and the fact that I had previously been in two relationships. I was not disappointed nor felt any anxiety because of it. I promised to be wholeheartedly honest to myself and to God. Hence, I accepted the final decision as a message from God. The will of God also comes through representatives. I believe in it and I am finished with that.

Now I remain a layperson. I try to be active in the areas that are important for a Christian. I am currently working on the field of remembrance and reconciliation, which is a very painful topic in Slovenia. This is the proper place of an active layperson who respects the authority of the Church.

Here and there, some people comment that laypeople suddenly became ‘too brave’ in suggesting some things that might go overboard within the Church. But I feel that exactly the opposite is true. An increased activity of the laity should happen. For example, in our parish, a certain circle of people is very active. Almost every Sunday after Mass, we meet for coffee and we converse about the activities in our parish. We have a strong connection.

Hence, I see myself as an active layman.

What would you change if you had a chance to influence the cultural and systemic organization of the Church?

In cultural terms, I would give a greater role to women. The priesthood, even in the words of Pope Francis is still not an option for them. But in many cases, a woman is an essential building block of a Church community. I know

a case where a woman missionary in Canada, who is living among the Eskimos, with the exception of saying the Mass, leads the mission on her own.

Systemic? [A few moments of silence; he is thinking] I think that rather than a person the system needs to change. Namely, the system cannot be perfect, but if there is no internal connection with the Church and with Christ, even a good system will not work. The priests and those who preach the Gospel should go out into the periphery. Just as Jesus went. Even Pope Francis talks about it and is attempting to do it with his own actions. He takes care of those who are most neglected by society: from refugees to immigrants seeking a better life in Europe and other Western countries.

I read an interview with the Pope in which he said that homosexuals are the largest social casualties of our time. He spoke of the necessity of contact with those whom are marginalized. Although, I could say that in our time homosexuals in modern Western society are in some way privileged. They are mostly unhappy and lonely persons. I hardly know any homosexual who is personally fulfilled by being who he is. In short, in my opinion, the Church could do a lot if we got closer to these people.

How would you advise young people who suffer because they are different? What helped you and what would your advice be to them?

In my opinion, young people today spend a lot of their time behind a computer or on the phone. I am afraid that they believe that technology can make them happy or solve their problems.

What would be my advice? They should connect with their peers and build their own communities. With all that, it is very important, saying from my own experience, to have a role model or a leader that holds everything together. These days, there are many oratories in the Church across Slovenia, which I think are very positive experiences because in these groups, those who normally do not have contact or experience with the Church also come. It was like that in our parish this year as well.

But I would like to link this with the dimension of suffering. How were you overcoming it? I feel and think that there is a phenomenal person here in front of me, who was able to overcome something difficult. What would you say to others who are suffering? To a fellow human being who is suffering because

he feels that he is not accepted at home, nor at school, nor in the parish? What should this man do?

Let him turn to prayer [a smile]. From my experience, I can tell you that it is important to seek contact with God. From that encounter, I gained courage to speak out about myself.

Your happiness is closely linked with God. What could you say about your happiness so that people who are not religious would understand you? Is it possible?

Hmm... Of course. The Slovenian word for an encounter 'srečanje' contains in itself the word 'sreča' which means 'happiness'. The happiness, i.e. 'sreča', is the root as well as the beginning of the word encounter. For me, happiness is an essential part of the encounter. I am happy that we encountered one another here. But there are also other types of encounters that are much deeper. For example, two spouses meet in the depths of the sacrament and they transfer their experience into their common life. I believe that those deep encounters are not only meant for spouses, but for every man, although the shape and substance may vary from person to person. This is what everybody has to search for in his or her own life: How to meet other people and how to encounter God.

Mario, thank you for this encounter.

The most important thing is how you behave as a human, what you do, and who you love

A Layperson Speaks about Himself, His Search for Lively Liturgy, and Experiences with Catholic Priests

Interview with Mateusz, Poland
Interview Held in Polish and Translated into English
by Katarzyna Remża

Key words: communist inheritance, searching for right religion, boring liturgy, protestant Church, Confession, homosexuality, sexuality

In our private conversation, you told me that you are ‘a very strong believer’. Could you say something about that and introduce yourself?

I should clarify something first: I didn’t say that I’m ‘a strong believer’ because there is no such thing; you can’t grade faith. You are a believer or not. You can’t be ‘a strong believer’ or ‘a weak believer’. I would specify it in that way: When I say that I’m a believer it means that I believe in the existence of some transcendental powers plus I observe and live by some values. This makes me a believer.

You grew up in Catholic family, right?

It’s not so simple because I grew up in a family, which was deeply divided in many ways, for example, in civil or legal contexts. When it comes to the topic of faith, I can say that it was divided as well. Namely, my father’s family is anti-religious because my paternal grandmother was in the communist party. During the communist times, namely the Polish People’s Republic era, she had a prominent position at work. In that period, the Church and government were in opposition and if a person who was related to the communist party was seen in church, they could face some bad consequences

at work because of that. So, it depended on the individual's choice.

My Baptism was a mysterious event. They insisted on keeping my Baptism a secret; therefore, I was baptized in some village instead of my hometown. My grandmother couldn't let it happen in our city. My father didn't receive First Communion and my parents only had a civil marriage.

On the contrary, my mother's family believe in God. My mother was never 'a strong believer', but right now, it seems like she has become a fanatic. She was always looking for her own way of faith. She was very interested in the culture of the East and other religions. She was also interested in Freemasonry. When I was four, we attended Hare Krishna group meetings for a while. I remember that they served excellent food. People were very open and as it turned out, even too much. Because of that, my mom left this idea behind but the whole time she was looking for the right religion. And there was a time when we really liked the Baptists' point of view.

How old were you?

Regarding the Baptists, I remember that we were going to meetings when I was 10 or 11 years old, but at the same time, I received First Communion. We really liked Baptist congregations because in every city it was different. I mean the Baptists in Bydgoszcz, Warsaw, Poznan, or Gdansk held their meetings in their own specific way.

As a boy, I often went to my single aunt's home in Danzig. She was a Baptist. These Baptist meetings looked completely different from the Masses in the Catholic Church. And to be honest, these meetings, which they call services, were much better for me. First of all, in the Catholic Church, you can feel stagnation during the celebration of the Mass. Of course, when we celebrate some holidays or other occasions some things are changed a little bit, prayers are longer or shorter. But anyway, most Masses look the same. In contrast, at Baptist services, everything is unexpected. They really want to broaden their knowledge about the Bible; they read and analyze it. In our church, Mass lasts an hour or 45 minutes. There, it takes about 2 hours, sometimes even longer, and after the service, they have meetings.

Going to a Catholic church sometimes could be referred to as a waste of time, at least that's how I feel about it. To be honest, I'm rarely focused during Mass; I'm miles away, and I'm sure that I'm not the only one. A lot of people think about different things just because it's monotonous and boring. On the contrary, just studying the Bible gives me the feeling that your time is

definitely not wasted. You can read and learn, which is very interesting itself. For me, the Bible is fascinating indeed. And it's not even strictly for religious matters. When Baptists read some parts of the Bible aloud, for example, about farmhouses or sheep farms, they usually demonstrate how it would look like before Christ and that is just an example, because various topics are discussed. After listening to stories like that, you are focused on your spiritual life and you feel that you have learnt something. Once they were talking about the marriage at Cana and the transformation of water into wine and they told us some interesting facts about wine production in that period. The two-hour service had a pleasant atmosphere because they introduce you to a little information in a way that makes you interested and focused.

I loved the Baptist meetings and people really know each other well. My mom and I didn't know Gdansk or Sopot,¹ but it didn't matter because everyone was so nice and they invited us to some other meetings and shared some interesting information with us. Sometimes, it was fascinating but at other times, it was also strange...

So you go to a Baptist church and a Catholic church at the same time?

Yes. I don't like some things in the Catholic Church and Baptist church alike. For example, Baptists don't believe in the Mother of God's sanctity but it doesn't mean that I have to agree with that. What I'm trying to say is that I just appreciate the organization for certain things and I'm sure that I'm not the only one.

What about the Church? Do you feel more like a member of the Catholic Church?

Well, to be honest, there are some reasons for which I have to admit it: The infrastructure or location of churches is easier to find. Basically, I'm a person who can pray even in a synagogue. For me, it's not a problem. I think that if you need to pray you can also do it at home. Sometimes, I have the feeling that I have to go to church. And when I come back from work, I look at my watch to see if it's already 6 pm because I prefer to be there earlier, at about 5:40 to pray, rather than just participating in the Mass at 6 o'clock.

Alright, so you said that you prayed in different churches?

Generally, for me, it's not a problem; you can pray in various places. Although most often I go to a Catholic church. I mentioned that sometimes I

avoid going to Mass because of boredom or monotony. But when we're talking about holydays, I go to Mass and I like it, albeit, most of all, I go to church because of personal reasons. You can talk to God at home, but after all, I have to admit that the church ambiance itself, I mean, even just the building, gives me a better opportunity to focus. There, other things do not disturb you.

Do you perceive priests as authority figures? Is it important for you to stay in touch with a priest or a pastor?

Well, it is not the most important issue and it very much depends on the person. Sometimes, you can get to know a priest and for me it's really significant. But on the other hand, it's not so usual to go to a priest and to introduce yourself. The best moment to get to know a priest is the annual visitation during Christmas time or Confession but if we're talking about the second one, recently, I tend to go to Confession less frequently.

Why?

Because I had a few unpleasant situations during Confession. The first situation was when I went to Confession before my grandfather's funeral Mass. I didn't receive absolution due to the fact that the priest said he hadn't seen me at church for a long time. At the end, he added very ironically: "Try next time." I'm a person who says what he thinks so I responded to him really rudely and all the people who were around me heard it.

Before that, I used to confess once every two months and after that situation, I didn't go to Confession for four years. Then a family member asked me to be the godfather of their child, so I had to go to Confession. I went to another church, thinking it would be different. Later, it turned out that the priest was even more severe than the previous one. I said to him that I didn't regret what I had done because, in my opinion, it wasn't a sin; I just wanted to say what was on my mind, that's all. That thing was a family issue; to be more specific, it was about some situation with my father. I don't even know why I said it to the priest. I barely talk to anyone about that. I try to avoid this topic even with my mom.

By the way, my parents got divorced two months ago and none of them told me.

And for how long were they separated?

It was back and forth all the time; they were separated for a few months

and then they would get back together for a week and so on. I guess the whole separation lasted altogether around 10 years.

I just wanted to talk to the priest about this. He claimed that he couldn't give me absolution because he felt some bad emotions on my side. We all know that when Confession is over the priest knocks, but that time I didn't hear anything so I was kneeling for ten minutes in silence; he was waiting for me to say 'I regret' and finally I casually said: "All right, I regret." He gave me absolution, which in my opinion was shameful, because he knew that I just said it to get the signed paper so that I could be a godfather.

The last unpleasant situation with a priest occurred during an annual visitation. He discovered that my mom was not married in the Church, so he called me a bastard.

Was it the priest who was already at your home before?

No, it was the priest who was visiting us for the first time. I started to argue with him and he told me that I didn't go to Mass very often. Apparently, the priest sees everything.

How big is your parish?

Oh, my parish is very big. Therefore, I am surprised. How do they know who goes to church? At the end, there was a handshake. He gave me a hand, I gave him mine, and I squeezed it; then he squeezed really hard, so I squeezed harder... It was a long handshake and definitely unpleasant. The visit ended with the slamming of the door.

Do you still want to receive an annual visitation from the priest?

That was two years ago. We refused an annual visitation a year ago because of that, but in the last months, my mother became 'a very strong believer'. She attends Mass very often and all other Catholic ceremonies. This year, we received an annual visitation and a different priest came. I didn't want to participate in it, but finally, I did it for my mom, as we live together.

Fortunately, the priest was very nice; we had a good time together and I could tell that he was a priest with a real vocation, one that is ready to help you if you have a problem. In my opinion, a good priest should also be a kind of psychologist who can listen and offer advice.

Do you often meet priests like him? Do you know any priest who

you can call for help?

I haven't looked for help so far, but I think that that priest was one of those that could have been a good one to talk to. This year, I was asked once again to be a godfather. I went to Confession, but not to a parish priest. I went to Confession with a monk from the Benedictine monastery. I always treated Confession like an opportunity to open up and maybe that's the reason why I had such problems. I was surprised because this time I opened myself up again and that was it. I just met a monk who was able to give me helpful advice and told me that I was a good guy and I didn't have to confess every month, twice a year is enough. Actually, for the very first time, I could openly talk about sex with someone from the clergy and he understood me. I didn't mention my sexual orientation; I didn't go that far.

To be clear, you are gay, right?

Yes.

Why didn't you tell him? Did you think that it would outrage the monk? Or maybe, was it too much for the first time?

Sex was always a taboo in my family. I never saw my parents kissing. My mother never asked me if I had a girlfriend. We never talked about things like relationships, love, fascination, girlfriends, or boyfriends. I always kept everything inside of me. There was never a situation that I spoke with my mother or with my aunt about these topics. Therefore, it was a huge step for me to talk about sex with a stranger, to a confessor.

Talking about this stuff, for example, with my friends was uncomfortable for me, even though I am a really open person. Now, I have friends who openly share their love or sex experiences, and slowly, I'm learning how to feel more comfortable talking about this topic.

Do you feel discriminated by the Church because of your sexual orientation?

So far, I haven't encountered it many times. Once a monk raised the topic of homosexuality during the Mass and he spoke negatively about it. Hearing opinions like that is really painful and makes me sad, being who I am. Oh, and it's worth mentioning that Baptists are extremely critical about homosexuality and it bothered me a lot.

Being gay, it's not nice to hear such things being said during services.

However, in that kind of situation, to be clear, I don't take offence and stay away. I feel more embarrassed than anything. Over the past 6 years, the attitude of Polish society has changed and things seem to be going in the right direction, so I'm not losing hope.

I spent a lot of time with my aunt from Gdansk; she repeated over and over again that homosexuality is curable. I told her about my friends rather than myself; I tried to hide it somehow.

Do you have a partner?

During the third year of my studies, I began seeing someone. It was my secret; no one knew about us.

I have to admit that the gay world is very specific and doesn't suit me at all. There are some gay people who are funny and trustworthy and I would like to stay in touch with them, but they are the minority.

Would you like to be able to develop your relationship in the religious sphere, have the opportunity to legalize it?

When I wasn't sure if I was gay, I was rigidly against homosexual marriage. It's okay to live with another person but marriage is not acceptable. I also didn't know what marriage looked like, probably because of my family affairs. On my mother's side of the family, every marriage ended in divorce. All my relatives were always unsatisfied with their partners. My mom's sister finally married the person who made her happy and we can all see that. After all, I perceive marriage as a serious step in one's relationship and if I found a person about whom I would be one hundred percent sure, I would also like to get married. But first of all, it should be a thoughtful decision.

Would you like to legalize your relationship in the Church?

Yes and no; it doesn't bother me. It depends on the other person: If he was a believer and I felt like he was the one, then yes, I would like to have a church wedding too.

What about kids?

Kids... I've changed my mind about homosexual marriage but I'm one hundred percent sure that gay couples should not have children. It is likely that a child who is brought up by a gay couple would also be a homosexual because at home she or he had such a family model. It's not an easy way to

live; it's pretty hard. I don't want to say that a child's life could fall to pieces or something, but I don't want to create potential problems, which are part of homosexuality. A child like any human being is watching, learning, adopting habits, and in my opinion, should be able to grow up in a normal, I don't like this word and now I'm using it, so maybe let's say in a common family.

Do you see a place for yourself in the Catholic Church? You said that you have been to many churches to find understanding, haven't you? I'm wondering if you as a believer feel fully accepted in any particular Church.

Altogether, I feel good; sometimes, I have weak moments, but overall, I see myself in the Catholic Church as well.

However, the Church is against homosexuality. How do you explain it to yourself?

I tell myself that there is no such thing as orientation; there is only love and that's it. It's none of anyone's business; this is totally my issue. The most important thing is how you behave as a human, what you do, and last but not least, who you love and it doesn't matter what gender that person is. It should be all about what we're representing instead of what orientation we have.

But on the other hand, you hold back from saying your orientation during Confession.

You have known me for a while and you know that I don't have any problem talking about my sexual orientation. For a long time, indeed, I tried to hide it but right now, I'm not ashamed to say "I'm gay". The problem is that talking about sex was a taboo for me. Damn, I don't know, I struggle...

Hmm... I'm debating with myself. Yes, I don't hide it... but right now, I can't help but wonder why I did it, probably I was afraid... although I shouldn't be... maybe previous experiences made me have preconceived notions... maybe I was afraid that he wouldn't give me absolution.

During Confession, did you mention your homosexual experience?

I just spoke about my sex life and if the priest had asked, I would have told him.

Anyway, you are doomed to live without marriage, which

according to the Church is a sin...

Yeah, in Poland.

Do you see other gay people at the church?

Well, I know that there are gays who go to church, even participate in church life.

Do you show support for each other, at least by making eye contact?

I don't look for support or contact with others; sometimes, you can notice some signs but I don't react. If I'm already seeing someone, I don't need anyone else.

What I mean is just showing support for each other, giving a sign that you are in the same situation, the same boat...

I know what you mean. The gay world is very distinctive and I'd rather not meet other gays if I'm seeing someone in particular. It's not my intention to broaden my gay circle of friends. I have two gay friends who are selfless and trustworthy. Instead of jumping into my bed, they want to listen to me and to be helpful. I know that I can count on them in hard times. Besides them, there would be a person with whom I'm having a relationship and that's enough; I don't need anyone else in gay society.

***And do you feel the need to be a part of the Church community?
Assuming that the Church is a community of people sharing
some ideas?***

Maybe I should feel such a need; there are moments during some holydays or at other times when I feel really good, but most of the time I go to church just for myself. Well, I also feel the need for a community at funeral Masses for my relatives, but generally, not during regular Masses.

Translator's Notes:

¹ Places where Baptist congregations are.

I am somehow different, and being different is often not welcomed in the Church

A Lay Theologian Speaks about His Inner Conflicts

Interview with Hezoun, Slovakia
Interview Held in Slovakian and Translated into English
by Peter Stašik

Key words: homosexuality, Church teaching on homosexuality, being minority in the Church, pastoral care of homosexuals, homosexual priests

What did the Church mean to you during your childhood and early youth?

When I was a child, my parents forced me to go to church. This changed radically when, thanks to some people in the second year of high school, I experienced a kind of personal conversion. Since then, God and the Church have had a very important place in my life. Actually, the Church for me is a community in which I grew up and learned everything that I know about faith.

A young person wants to belong somewhere. Was your attachment to the Church the result of your wish to be with other people?

Yes, but also I felt the obligation to do something for my parish community where I spent much time. I was very active: I was an altar boy, I volunteered in some parish activities, I assisted our parish priest, and I was quite often in the rectory. Thus, my relation to the parish was not only spiritual, but practical as well.

Did you become aware of your attraction to the same sex at that time?

I am not sure. Probably, something like that was somewhere inside of me. However, I was not aware of it; I didn't know what it was nor how to describe and name it. I asked no questions about it and received no answers. Probably, I ignored it and suppressed it deep within myself.

When did you realize what it was?

I think that I was twenty-two years old. At that time, I was a university student who was not happy with his life. I was not able to control my thoughts and feelings. I started thinking about my future and about things that happened when I was a child. I had to sort all those thoughts out.

Did you ask a priest for help or advice?

I tried. Some of them didn't want to hear what I wanted to say; they would stop me while I was talking. Others gave me advice like: "It will go away, don't worry. Don't think about that. It will be better if you don't tell this to anyone."

Can you freely and honestly discuss your life situation with other members of your parish community?

I can imagine doing it. However, I would have to trust that person.

Are you forced to lead a 'double life'?

Most people that I have contact with don't know that I am gay. Therefore, I have to be very careful what I say and how I behave. I have to act and pretend in order to keep my secret. That is because I don't know how people would react if they knew my secret, if they would start avoiding, insulting, or attacking me. Hence, I still lead 'a double life' and it will be like that until I am ready to reveal my secret.

How would you describe your belonging to the Church now?

I would say that my relation to the Church has changed. I have become more critical to what is happening in the Church. Besides, I am somehow different, and being different is often not welcomed in the Church.

What about your personal relationship with God?

I separate my personal faith in God from the Church. I couldn't accept all Church teachings and especially those teachings that are against homosexuals, i.e. against me, against my beliefs, and against my personal religious

convictions. Therefore, I decided to ignore those teachings. When I was a teenager, I had no problems with those teachings. That is because I was not thinking about it; I was not critical. Now, I cannot accept it anymore.

Did your previous relationship influence your spiritual life?

Yes. It was difficult to be authentic in a relationship when you know that the Church does not accept you, your relationship, and your behavior. I was permanently thinking that I was doing something against God's will and His commands. Such thoughts evoked ambivalent feelings in me. My conscience reminded me all the time what the Church and Bible teach about such behavior.

You were in love and because of that, you were afraid that you were doing something wrong?

Exactly, especially in the beginning, I had huge inner conflicts. On one side, I was in love as everyone else could be. However, on the other side, I felt a huge burden, an obstacle that prevented me from being free.

What would be, according to you, the best vocation for gay Christians?

In my opinion, homosexuals could be clerics. Actually, everyone knows, of course unofficially, that there are many gay men in the Church. I have never read anywhere that a homosexual priest cannot be a saintly priest. However, not everybody can live in celibacy.

There should be some solution for those who cannot live in celibacy, i.e. for those who want to live with their partners. Therefore, I am in favor of registered partnerships or civil unions. I wouldn't call those partnerships 'marriage' because this term should be reserved for the union between a man and a woman.

Another solution for gay Christians could be communities with defined rules. This could also solve the main problem of many homosexuals, namely loneliness.

Do you believe that the Church teaching on homosexuality will change over time?

I strongly believe and hope that it will. The current doctrine is outdated and not in accordance with science. It has to be changed and upgraded...

What motivates you to stay an active member despite all these difficulties?

Now, I am not as active as I used to be. However, I am not thinking of renouncing or abandoning my religion despite the fact that it would be the easiest solution in my situation. I do not want to do it because I want to live to see the change in the Church, and the changes could be initiated only if people like me are within the Church.

The second reason why I am still Catholic lies in the fact that I grew up in the Catholic faith and that faith is deeply rooted inside of me. I have no reason to abandon this treasure.

What positive changes would help you to live your Christian life more fully?

I would appreciate more positive attitudes towards sexual minorities in the Church and more interest, empathy, and inclusion for all those who are different – not only gays. In other words: More pastoral care, less moral judgment.

You are an active member of Gay Christians Slovakia. Could you say something more about this association?

Our group was established in 2011 as an informal community, i.e. we are not formally registered. We have about 50 members and 10 to 15 people come regularly to our monthly meetings. In addition to that, we are in correspondence via email with 250 people nationwide who do not live in Bratislava and therefore cannot come to our meetings.

How often do you have meetings? What does a meeting look like?

We meet monthly, usually on a Saturday afternoon, in a meeting room of the Protestant Church of Brethren or the LGBT center in Bratislava. Previously, we had our gatherings in a Catholic parish house as well. However, we met there secretly and now that place is not available anymore. We asked some Catholic organizations in Bratislava for a meeting room, but all of them refused.

Every meeting has two dimensions and two parts: spiritual and social. In the first one, i.e. the spiritual part, we usually have a lecture delivered by our guest from various Christian denominations.

Until now, none of the Catholic priests have agreed to be our guest. They say that they need official permission from a bishop in order to give us a lecture.

In the second part of our meetings, we discuss current interesting issues in society and in the Church. We share our experiences, troubles, scars, and joy. Sometimes, we watch a movie. We also organize some events and excursions in which we invite those who are not members of our community.

Can you say that you have found your place in the Church in this community?

I would rather say that it is a supplement, i.e. this community offers me everything that my Church doesn't give to me and that is acceptance, tolerance, empathy, and similar things.

Brief Statement about the Church by a Homosexual

Essay Written by Robo, Poland
Translated from Polish into English
by Agnieszka Anna Ukleja

Key words: teaching of the Church, belonging, sins, traditional values, homosexuality

Since I was a child and up until today, I have been connected with the Catholic Church. However, my opinion about the Catechism has changed significantly over years.

I think that the Catholic Church loses many believers because of Her current policy. No acceptance for sexual minorities, of which I am a member, leads to the increased hatred among humans who are afraid of the unknown... and yet, the official teaching of the Catholic Church 'God is rich in mercy' is not compatible with reality in the Church. God accepts everyone regardless of faith, skin color, or sexual orientation. The Scripture clearly says: "For the mountains may go away and the hills may totter, but my faithful love will never leave you, my covenant of peace will never totter, says Yahweh who takes pity on you." (Is 54:10)

It is sad how priests treat their faithful... In a way, they kill faith in people and the possibility for salvation. The hermetic environment of the Church hierarchy encourages corruption and blocks the evolution of free thought. The faithful feel lost because Mother Church does not treat Her children equally.

Those who receive privileges are those who subdue to the law; however, it is not the type of law that was Spirit-inspired, but which is aimed at controlling the freedom and consciences of the faithful.

The Church never goes to the people – The people have to come to the Church

A Divorcee Has no Access to the Sacraments

Interview with Pan X, Poland
Interview Held in Polish by Julia Kaminska
Translated into English by Agnieszka Anna Ukleja

Key words: regular churchgoer, tradition, music, financial issues, divorcee, the Church as community, missing sacramental life, marriage annihilation, nationalization of the Church, the Church as peacekeeper

Do you consider yourself a believer and do you practice your religion?

Yeah, I'm a believer. I am 60 and all these years I have lived being closely connected with the Roman Catholic Church. I would like to stress that my family has always been closely associated with the life of our parish and local Church. Our family life was organized according to the liturgical calendar. This was even expressed in our everyday activities.

Sunday was of course a day without work; on Saturday, we were busy until late afternoon to end the week and to prepare for the next day. The work included, among others: cleaning the household, preparing our clothing and shoes. Everything had to be ready. On Sunday, there was nothing much to do, but go to church. On Friday, we never ate meat. Nowadays, people do not adhere to these old practices anymore, but I still do.

I have the habit of attending Mass every morning. I have my grotto there in which there is a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes. I have visited the places of veneration of the Virgin Mary, maybe because I was born on a day that is closely associated with the cult of the Virgin Mary.

What is your relationship to the Church and how has this

relationship changed over the years?

I am the youngest in the family. I have three siblings and my family's participation in the life of the parish was closely associated with practical activities. My mom taught catechesis and singing in our parish, and the whole family sang in the choir. Through our activity in the choir, the community recognized us as 'church people'. So we practiced pretty hard.

In the 50's and 60's, there were raids on the property of the Church by the communist police. I still remember how we secretly moved the furniture and other things from the church and rectory to our house. The furniture was covered with hay. Now, I understand why these things happened, but as a child, I did not. I remember that we were forbidden to talk about it among each other, and especially with the others.

I played the organ and later, I played the guitar during Mass. Guitars in church appeared only in the late 60's and 70's. Father Diwal introduced guitars and youth singing in church. That's how young people were attracted.

Back then, I was an employee in the shipyard. Once there was a protest, bloodily suppressed by the militia and the army. This experience shook me up; it was my initiation into politics. I already knew that I would be on the other side of the fence - I would be with the people, the workers, with whom I would engage in the fight for independence. And that's what happened. In addition to the protest in which I took an active part, I was also a member of the strike committee in the shipyard, which in a way was an act of bravery because to become one you had to stop being anonymous and to reveal your identity. I was not afraid of anything.

Another element of my youth rebellion, although inconspicuous on the surface, was starting a band in our parish. I was responsible for the guitars and the sound system, which were later used in the Corpus Christi processions. The matter of acoustics in church was somehow naturally regulated, but on the street, it was not. The State had quite a strong monopoly in organizing the sound system during outdoor ceremonies; that's why I decided to do it myself in a more professional way. Naturally, the government did not like it. I was called in for interrogation and was requested to stop being involved in the organization of processions. In return for the favor, I was proposed a bribe: a good education and an apartment in Warsaw. They did not convince me. Then one of those interrogators tried to persuade me and to change my views. He said that he had been an altar boy himself, but later on, he looked at things differently. This argument did not convince me

either, and then I told them: "I was born in this faith, and I will die with it." Their response was: "You will never have a career in the shipyard!"

But I was not afraid of anything. I followed my brother's thinking, who as a child, when asked if he was not afraid to walk through the forest, this was his way to school, answered: "One who has God in his heart is not afraid!" This sentence influenced me a lot and has been often used in different life situations. Back then, my relationship with God was confident and brave. Later on, it influenced my artistic work; in that period, I created various 'protest' rock songs. They were in fashion. On one of these tracks, we asked God: "Who is man that you remember him?" In another song, we asked an important question: "Where are you going?" I know that these songs had a strong impact on people, because wherever we gave concerts, there, new local bands appeared. In my later artistic activity, when I composed oratorios and other kinds of musical works like paschal mysteries, I invited the local bands to join in common touring.

Has your relationship with the Church always been this way; have there been crises or disappointments?

First of all, the local Church has never had enough funds and I had to finance everything from my own pocket. Sometimes, one salary was not enough to prepare a concert so I had to take up additional responsibilities. Therefore, regardless of my professional work, I began to carry out projects and organized the sound system in churches. Already then, my artistic activity reached a professional level and I took part in the Sakro-song festival. It was a festival of sacred music with a very high professional level. There were more than thousands of performers. This festival was bigger than the one held in Opole.¹ During the festival, Cardinal Karol Wojtyla himself offered me a job. I guess that it was a kind of reward for my long-term efforts. Meeting and having a conversation with Cardinal Wojtyla gave me the impetus to work further in the same direction.

Subsequent years were filled with family responsibilities. My friends were also in the phase of establishing their families. We all wanted to settle down with our professional lives. Therefore, we had to limit our artistic activity, which at one point begun to be a burden for many of us. We stopped at the end of the 70's and each of us tried to settle his work and family affairs. The progressive degradation of social life in the 70's was too strong. However, I remained politically active.

Then August '80 came. Ten years earlier, I was involved in the revolt of

blue-collar workers; consequently in the 80's, I joined the social movement *Solidarity*. In general, I was very much involved in the emerging *Solidarity* movement.

How would you describe your relationship with the Church?

It is not that easy. Certainly, I do not regret the time that I spent on the social activities for the local Church. The fact is that I sacrificed more time to this activity than to my family or professional work. I think that this relationship with the Church bears fruit now.

For me, the Church is something very dynamic, constantly evolving. The question is whether it is moving in the direction, which people would like? Probably not; I think certain things are missing. Namely, there is a progressing degradation of social life, people isolate themselves from others, and they do not have personal relationships. The Church, contrary to appearances, is the place where people open up and meet each other. But the negative phenomenon is that the Church does not go out to people. The people have to come to the Church. Some social circles, like circles of the disabled or church choirs are trying to organize themselves, but this is all on a small scale.

My feeling is that if a relationship with the Church is to be individual, if it is about the Church and me, then this institution is unnecessary. Then, when it's just God and me, why do we need the Church? But the Church, however, merges, She has to integrate, shape, and straighten.

Do you feel like you are part of your parish?

There is a huge discrepancy between life and religion itself. It is due to many factors. I was not able to maintain my marriage. Because we did not want to cause further conflicts, when our children reached adulthood, we made a mature decision about separation.

This is a personal problem for me because I cannot participate in the sacraments since I am divorced. I have to agree with that, but I'm not happy because I thought that it would be regulated somehow. The Church sees it differently. The Church commandments are clearly defined and there is no turning back from them. Perhaps this is necessary, otherwise the Church could not maintain Her *status quo* if all provisions were to be freely interpreted. I agree - or perhaps I shall put it differently - I accept it. Perhaps the community of Christians will decide to change it one day. As Vatican

Council II changed many things, it is possible that this one will also be changed.

What would you change in the Church?

The Church should not be changed. I should adapt to the Church. However, from my own perspective, I would really want people, who are no longer married, even after separation, to be able to receive the sacraments. In my opinion, this is a problem and the Church must somehow solve it structurally. So far, the Church is doing it individually, by analyzing individual cases.

I know people whose marriage was annulled by Church tribunals. However, such possibilities are not publicly known because they could lead to free interpretations of marital vows. I believe that it should be regulated, not changed. This is especially important for people who care about their religious life. I feel alienated in this situation but I try to direct my words to God in prayer: "And only say the word and I shall be healed." That's why I have to continue in this state unless I get permission from the confessor to receive the Eucharist. That has happened in the past.

Besides, another issue to talk about is the nationalization of the local Church in Poland. I do not think that the local Church can provide for Herself financially; therefore, it should receive support from the State. She supported us in the struggle for independence. During the time of socio-political changes, the Church in Poland maintained peace; due to this, revolution was possible. We couldn't understand it in the past, but today we can already say: bloodsheds in Yugoslavia, Romania, and today in Ukraine are the evidence of the local Church's role in calming down the atmosphere in Poland and preventing the risk of civil war, despite strong social resentments during this period. A withdrawal of the Church from influencing the social and political life today is, in my opinion, a big mistake. She should not sit quietly now.

The Church enjoys Her new freedom; She has access to the public media; however, She has lost much of Her influence in the society. She is not able to maintain Her independence. Today the Church has more possibilities than ever before, namely, believers who cannot come to church have the opportunity to participate in the Mass through the media. The Polish Church should use the internet for education and the formation of Polish culture. It is not good if only one or two centers in Poland use the internet - it must be widespread and then it will certainly serve its purpose. Furthermore, each

parish can publish their own newspaper. Traditionalists say they do not have to do that because the Church is about prayer and meditation. But I believe that the Church is real; when She is active, then She is alive!

Besides, there is one thing, which the local Church neglects. People in Poland are receiving only one-sided information through the media. The problem is that the Church representatives do not appear in the public space and do not oppose such information. Therefore, there is the impression that the media uses such situations to go against the Church. The Church in Poland has to react and take an active role in informing the public.

Translator's Notes:

¹ The biggest festival of popular music in Poland.

I painfully experienced for myself what traditional Christianity means

A Divorced Women Describes Hypocrisy and Support in Her Local Church

Essay Written by Marija, Croatia

Translated from Croatian into English by Marijo Vukoja

Key words: divorcee, catechist, traditional way of life, avoiding of some churches, domestic violence, being 'watched', dormant faith, pastoral of divorcees

I was raised by my grandmother in the Catholic faith. She let the seed of faith grow in me and my parents had nothing against it. However, the faith for them was not so important. In my village, it was normal for all children to attend Sunday school and to receive the sacraments of initiation, but the real foundation of all social relations and public activities was rooted in folklore and tradition. Being obedient to my grandmother, I always attended the Holy Mass and Sunday school and I used to sing in a parish choir.

Then I met my religion teacher who was a priest. He captured the interest of the youth, gathered us, helped us, and took care of us in an unobtrusive manner. He never imposed anything nor did he condemn anyone. There were no 'great' breathtaking sermons or wise pieces of advice from him. That priest wasn't young and he didn't organize any special or spectacular gatherings for young people. Instead, he was a simple witness of faith in everyday small activities. Today, I am a catechist and I quite often think of him and wonder how he managed to do that.

As a high school student, I accepted the faith as something very important. I even decided to study Theology. The idea of joining a religious order was quite often in my mind too. Today, when I think about that period of my life, when I was studying Theology, I think that there must have been some kind of faith crisis, other little disappointments, and a disorientation that

disheartened and slammed me...

I got married and moved to a small city whose inhabitants lead a very traditional way of life. It was not easy to adapt to that kind of mentality nor was it easy to get used to my new family, i.e. my husband's family. At the beginning, until I started working, we also experienced some financial difficulties. The priest in my new parish was totally different from my previous parish priest. He was focused on building new churches, moralizing, calling out, and condemning. It happened once that after the Holy Mass I felt really angry and disappointed. Afterwards, if I knew that he was in our parish I would rather go to Mass in a neighboring parish.

Soon, I encountered some huge problems in my life; I was a victim of domestic violence. I was alone with two small children in an environment where I had nobody to turn to. I painfully experienced for myself how many people practice their traditional Christianity and what it means for them to be Christians - a person in need and with serious problems who comes to them suddenly becomes invisible. In those moments, my faith, which had been dormant, somehow, gave me strength. I accepted my cross and let God lead me. There was no chaplain or spiritual director who could help, comfort, or advise me. There was only God.

I was worried how the people in the Church authorities would react to the news that a catechist was getting divorced. Since I am naturally quite an introverted person, I did not complain or squawk, nor did I ask anyone what they would do. However, I feared for my job. Other priests came into my parish and I think that I was tested and 'watched' for a certain period. When they understood what had happened, they gave me unconditional support. They also supported me when my husband filed for divorce and asked me to move out. They also approved of my current way of life.

Today, I participate in parish life through working with children. I do it voluntarily and it makes me happy. I can openly and freely propose and suggest what I think. My opinion is accepted and priests respect me. I know that there was a time when I was being 'watched' as a catechist, pastoral co-worker, and as believer, but it does not offend me. I do understand that priests have their responsibilities and that they would be held accountable if I did something wrong.

The relation with the priests in my parish cannot be described as strictly professional but neither is it a friendly one. But I'm not bothered by it and I'm not feeling restrained either. The priest with whom I still have a close

relationship and who I readily treat like my second father is my religion teacher from high school. We call each other quite often and I am very happy when I can see him. A lot depends on priests, as they indeed have to be witnesses of the faith. If they are not, then they are moralizing, condemning, and judging. I worry that in the future, there might be a new parish priest who will behave in that way and we won't be able to work together in an honest and pleasant way.

Sometimes, I wonder if I could maybe help someone who is in a similar marital situation to me. I am convinced that there is a need for something like this in the Church. The problem is that I lack courage to propose or start something up. Besides, I'm not sure if there would be support for this type of project or program, and if others would understand it.

I'm not convinced that priests in the area where I live have the 'tools' necessary to help families with present-day problems, whether it is a divorce, problems with children, addictions, etc. They often offer spiritual retreats, seminars, or something similar but I don't think that this is the solution. A person with family problems isolates themselves and they become focused only on their problems. Faith often is their only escape from reality and problems, and offers them consolation.

Regarding the issue of engaged laity in the parish, what bothers me is that most of them remain active only in their closed groups. In conversations, they emphasize their devotion and religiosity in relation to others who are 'outside', i.e. not members of their group. I think that they would like me to join them too because I am a catechist and have contact with the parish priest.

I think that good modern, i.e. new, evangelization must focus primarily on the man and it will bear fruit only if real witnesses of the faith work on it.

However, I do not think that the Church is in a critical situation these days. Each period of the history of the Church has had its own challenges and problems. Nevertheless, the awareness that the Church is a community of all the baptized is very dear to me. I am deeply convinced that God has His own ways of approaching each person. Therefore, even though I do not live in the happiest circumstances, I am happy.

If my marriage hadn't failed and other real life problems hadn't happened to me, maybe today, my faith would still be dormant. Thus, through my cross, God woke me up!

I believe that there is a place for me, but some officials of the Church simply spoil it

A Humiliating Experience of Going through the Annulment of Marriage Trial

Interview with Anna, Poland
Interview Held in Polish and Translated into English
by Katarzyna Remża

Key words: traditional faith, charismatic movement, Light-Life Movement, divorce, annulment of marriage, trial, Confession, sexuality, deprecation of environment, good pastoral practice, education of priests

Could you tell us something about yourself and your faith?

I grew up in a family, which was rooted in and shaped by faith. The members of my immediate family, my mom, my grandmother, my aunt and uncle were regular churchgoers. My dad had very little influence on my upbringing because he and my mom split up when I was very young.

Like many other primary school children, I was rebellious in my youth. During this period, I decided that once I finish primary school, I would not attend catechism classes any more. This decision resulted from different doubts. I asked myself why I should believe and practice faith if my inner ‘I’ did not accept it! However, I was exposed to the influence of my peers, the pressure of my family, and since the catechism classes were compulsory, I never opposed attending them openly. Maybe I was too young to do it at that time. Even though I hoped that in high school I would be freed from this annoyance.

Nevertheless, exactly the opposite happened. I met a person firmly rooted into faith and affiliated to the Church. She became my close friend. Thanks to her, my previous ‘firm’ decision of not going to church and catechism classes

faded. She and her older sister introduced me to the *Light-Life Movement*, created by father Blachnicki. I participated in these meetings at least once a week. There we celebrated a little bit of a different kind of Mass, one accommodated for youth. I joined the choir and went on a pilgrimage to Częstochowa during the summer holidays.

Thus, as a young teenager, I was deeply involved in religious activities. That made an enormous impact on my attitude towards faith. I believe that priests and nuns that I met there influenced my understanding of my place in the Church very much. For example, a missionary named Sister Łucja had a great influence on me. She played the guitar and she was a very intelligent person. Under her influence, I started thinking of becoming a nun. During various trips organized by the movement, I got to know other nuns as well. Once we went to Rome. Seeing so many sacred objects there and staying with nuns in their environment, in which they lived and worked, made me seriously think about this vocation. I met several good priests too. They were devoted to their vocation and not overly preoccupied with possessing goods. They had great passion for working with youth.

All of this made me feel like I was a firm believer. I had a great need to go to church more often than an average Catholic who goes to church weekly, just on Sundays. Maybe it was bizarre.

When I started my studies, my contact with the majority of these people became less frequent. At that time, my colleagues and people I hung out with were not much involved in the life of the Church. It looked like I landed on a completely different planet. However, I was going to Mass regularly and I enjoyed it. After I graduated from university, I got married.

Before we married, my husband-to-be received the sacrament of Baptism but he wasn't brought up in the faith and he did not receive any other sacraments. The members of his mother's side of the family were regular churchgoers. His father was born into an Orthodox family. However, due to political reasons, namely the communist regime, my husband's family's religious life was limited to the main religious ceremonies such as the celebration of Baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Since I was a believer and a person brought up in a religious Catholic family, it was very important for me to get married in the Church. For me, it was the only proper or right 'Godly way', as the people in my region use to say. Therefore, my husband-to-be had to receive all the missing sacraments before we could get married. I wanted this marriage to be so important for him.

After all the catechism classes in the parish and after we got married, we regularly went to Mass for several months, maybe years. When our child was born, we would walk together, with the stroller, to church. But with time, my husband would more and more often look for excuses not to go to church with me. At the beginning, he would use excuses like illness, 'feeling bad'. Later, his excuses became more trivial. After some time, he didn't even look for excuses. He just stopped going to church.

I was not happy because of that and I was worried for the family. We never took turns in looking after the child when the other person went to church; instead, all three of us went together. Both parents should educate a child from his or her early years. Also, the child has to be brought up in faith by both of us. I suppose that this is also part of the marriage vows. Okay, maybe a baby is not fully aware of such things, but it is known that the child develops by observing his or her parents and the surrounding environment. Thus, my husband participated less and less in it and in return, my frustration and grief were growing more and more. We lived quite a distance from the church and part of our way home led through the forest. In the past, the strollers were large and heavy and I needed help with mine.

I cannot say that I drifted away from the Church during that period. It was just such a pity that we did not participate in this life together, although we vowed at the altar to do it.

When did you leave the Church?

I would like to separate two topics: drifting away from the Church and drifting away from faith. I still consider myself a believer, although now I rarely go to church. However, I pray every day and I pay attention to how I pray. I avoid asking for something in my prayers and that is how I save my conscience from anything like 'When in fear, God is near'. I say prayers that I learnt by heart, but I also express my thanks for what is important to me. When I'm in need, when something bad happens to me, I pray to God for this too. But generally I'm trying not to ask and beg; I try to give thanks for what I have or for good things that have happened to me; or I say my prayers for someone else's intentions. For example, I pray daily for my dead dad.

On the other hand, I do not participate in the life of the Church much. Basically, I go to church for weddings, funerals, and other ceremonies that are important to my family. The simplest reason for that is laziness, as it is the main reason for the majority of people. But there are a few other reasons that contribute to this too.

Do you think it may be affected by a change in the quality of life today?

It is true that we all live more intensely and faster; we engage more in our work, and when the weekend comes we want to rest from work or to do something pleasant, such as going on trips. But it's all just excuses since each of us is able to find an hour of time to go to Mass even during the busiest week. The question is why we do not do this. Certainly, contemporary life is more comfortable and we make a better use of the benefits of civilization, but these are all excuses. In fact, apart from laziness, what also stopped me from practicing my faith better, was a little anger.

Anger for what?

I wouldn't say that I am angry with the Church. It would be too large a generalization. Anger overwhelms me when I think about the attitude of some priests and those who should be examples for others, and in my opinion, they are everything but good examples.

How did you come across such people?

It started with my divorce. Actually, it was not a divorce, but an annulment of marriage. In the Church, there are no divorces.

I swore at the altar 'till death do us part', but after 17 years of living together with my husband, I got a civil divorce. Although legally divorced, in light of ecclesiastical law, we were still married. Then, about four years ago, I met a man who was a widower. Previously, he was also married in the Church and he comes from a religious family. Since I care about this man and we made some plans for the future, I wanted to, let's say it like this, have 'an open door' in case of any future relationships.

Maybe I wouldn't have come up with the idea of asking for an annulment by myself if one priest whom I meet at least once a month hadn't persuaded me. That priest was also involved in the *Light-Life Movement* and he taught catechism classes in my primary school. He had a big influence on my attitude to faith. He was also the one who assisted at my wedding celebration. Therefore, it was hard to believe that that priest, who blessed my previous relationship, would accept my new relationship. Furthermore, in all subsequent meetings, he urged me to sort out my life. He urged me to submit an application and gave me the contact information of the person who takes care of such things in our diocese. At each further visit, he was asking if I

already did it and he insisted so much saying that if the marriage had broken down and if I was seeing another man, I needed to sort this situation out.

Not knowing how it could be possible to annul a marriage and not really believing in this possibility, I submitted my request. Bearing in mind that they needed a year to process my application, and one more year to give the final verdict, I got the annulment surprisingly very fast. Other people I know have been waiting for up to 8 years.

Someone might think that I should be happy because I freed myself from marriage in the ecclesiastical sense in such a short time. But what I went through during this period, it's just... Had I known what it would look like, I would have not requested an annulment. Never!!

What was so terrible about this trial?

I cannot talk about the details because I made an oath. Basically, those conversations with various officials of the Church were like rubbing salt into my open wounds. There were not only priests, but also other people such as a psychologist. This process was so humiliating. Humiliation - that is the right word. I had such a strong feeling of guilt. I never had this kind of feeling before. I felt humiliated and very, very bad. From bad to worse, when I received the verdict of annulation, I was again slapped in my face. Even today, whenever I think about that process and about the justification of the verdict, I feel like I'm being slapped in the face again and again.

I wanted to have this marriage annulled. I wanted to have the possibly of having another legal relationship in the Church with my new partner. But after how everything looked and what the argumentation for the verdict was, I simply doubt whether I will ever get reunited with someone in the Church again.

What was the main argument for the annulment of marriage in the verdict?

The main argument was that I am insane, that I am mentally unstable, and that any further relationships require psychological and psychiatric consultation.

I suppose that such an argument was based on the results of a written test. The test was quite long. It took one and a half hours to answer all of the questions. There were a lot of questions; maybe 50, maybe more. I feel so bad about it. It turns out that only I had to do this test; my husband appeared only

at one of the hearings and missed all of the others. Therefore, they formed an opinion based on the interrogation and the testimonies of only one side. And they based their verdict only on this fifty-questions test and a talk with a psychologist!

But it was not all. There is one more humiliating experience associated with this process. They told me that the process could begin only after I had been to Confession. I got a piece of paper, which I was supposed to present to a priest after Confession. He was then supposed to stamp and sign this document.

Before going to Confession, I thought that the hardest part would be writing a request for annulment. Once I became convinced that there was a possibility to get the annulment, I got the courage to do it. At that time, I believed that Confession should be just a matter of what I had on my conscience and how I wanted to reveal it in Confession. Well, I am not going to say anything about the Confession itself. What I am talking about is only the procedural matters, things that are not bound to secrecy by the seal of Confession.

I handed the document to the priest and I think that it was not the first case of such a kind for him. He started to yell at me. It was evident that he was very angry and irritated. At once, he was in a negative mood, although he couldn't have known what I had to say. He resented me because of his actual resentment towards the Church court. But I shouldn't have been the addressee of his objections.

He started by asking me why I needed this at all. I replied that I was dating somebody and I wanted to have order in my life. And the priest started to yell at me once again and threw the paper away so that it fell down on the floor. He resented my living with someone, living in the same house. He said that he would not hear my Confession and that he would not grant me absolution and asked me to go away.

I interrupted his speech and told him: "Wait, wait! I don't live together with that man. I don't share a common household with him. I just want to put everything in order to have this opportunity to do so." He calmed down a bit and finally heard my Confession. At the end, he signed the paper.

Thousands of thoughts about his reaction were going through my head. If someone lived and ran a joint household, he wouldn't even hear their Confession. When I said that we do not live together, which is true, it already was a sufficient argument for him to listen to my Confession, to grant me

absolution, to sign the paper, and to put a stamp on it. In my opinion, it is prudery and hypocrisy. The fact that we do not live together and do not have a joint household has nothing to do with the fact that we meet, go somewhere together, and have sex. Being in my fifties, when I meet with an adult man, I think that it is quite obvious that we do not just walk side by side and look into each other's eyes. This hypocritical morality and the attitude of that priest was shocking for me and I didn't like it. I don't like this double morality of the Church. I don't agree with it.

After a long period of not going to church, Confession, and Communion, due to divorce and the lack of absolution, I met the man whom I am dating now. Then I desired to confess, to go to church, to have such an opportunity... I wanted all of this not because someone told me to do it, but because I had such an inner need. I was not granted absolution in my city. My city seems to be a big city, but it turned out that the people there were small-minded. This idea of Confession kept going through my head for a pretty long time. A need to return to the Church was somehow building up in me. So I figured out that if I couldn't find acceptance, comprehension, and grace during Confession in my city then I should go to Warsaw. Before I set off, I looked for the possibilities to confess there.

I found a monastery in Warsaw where the monks specialize in working with youth with special needs, people with some life hardship, ex-prisoners, etc. They do not reject a person because of his or her past. If a man wants to return to the Church, or has never been in the Church and wishes to, they can find words of consolation and understanding. I was thinking that if they welcome such people, then I could hope to get words of consolation too.

So I went there. The Confession was very deep, touching, moving, valuably explained, and helped me to build up my confidence again. I received absolution. On the one hand, I was satisfied. I began to participate in the Confession again. I received Communion and went to Mass. But after some time, when I had to go to Confession in my town again, I came across a situation that repelled me from the Church once more: I didn't receive absolution.

Was it related to your divorce?

No. It was related to my current way of life. Therefore, I decided that I would live in a way that is consistent with what I feel. The priest only listens to the confession, but actually, we confess before God. However, receiving absolution depends on the priest you meet. Even for the same sins, it could

be different. This double morality annoys me a lot. I came to the conclusion that on Judgement Day God will accept me and not the Church's officials who look for a speck of dust in their brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in their own eyes.

How did the people around you react to your divorce? Do you still have friends associated with the Church?

I still keep very close relationships with many people who were close to me before. We socialize regularly. Their reactions to my situation differ. Some of them accept it. They say it is cool that I managed my life and they congratulate me. The priest who encouraged me to submit the application for annulment of marriage is one of those people too. But to my surprise, some people, especially those who I wouldn't have suspected to behave like that, reacted by asking: "How could you do it? After all, you pledged to this man that you wouldn't leave him till death separates you." I can't understand their reaction. It is also a kind of dual morality. Is it better to live with a man with whom there are more things that divide you than unite you? Such reactions were somehow shocking for me.

But there are also some people who avoid having contact with me as if I was louche.

What can be the reason for it?

I don't know, maybe it contradicts their morality, their attitude to the Church?

You are not participating in the life of the Church now, are you?

I said before that this comes in waves, periodically. But it is quite hard to talk about it like a wave of my religiousness. The people whom I encounter also influence it. There was a time, more than two years ago, when my partner and I went to Mass every Sunday. Usually, we were going to a church, which is closer to his house since there was a priest there who we really liked. It was visible that this man was really immersed in prayer. He was a truly spiritual person. We liked his sermons, which were short and clever, wise and illuminating. Those sermons were related to the content of the Scripture, to the Commandments of the Church, and not to the current politics. That's why we liked him.

He celebrated Mass in such a way that he involved each member of the community. The children loved him. Many believers wanted to meet and to

talk with him after he went out after the Mass was finished. It was a small community that stuck together.

The priest often organized some picnics in the churchyard. The point was to bring the families together and to attract young people. Altar boys and other parishioners who volunteered helped him. He generated such a great atmosphere and a feeling of belonging to the parish community. For me, it was such a pleasant surprise.

I also like how he collected money for the parish needs, or to build a parochial house. It is a common practice that money is collected in church. However, the only question is how it is done. Before I experienced that, some priests were asking arrogantly for money.

Unlike in many other parishes, where huge and beautiful parochial houses are built even before the church is, in this parish, it was exactly the opposite. First, the church was built. It was simple and neat, but spacious and comfortable. This impressed me a lot.

When it came to collecting money for the construction of the parochial house, again this priest was not arrogant. He organized a 'sale' of potatoes, blueberries, children's artwork... He probably got the potatoes from local farmers or someone else; blueberries were collected in the forest, etc. He was 'selling' goods that he had and parishioners were 'paying' for them deliberately. Sure, they were paying more than the actual value of those goods. It was so clever. You give a donation but you also get something in return. I liked it so much because it wasn't just begging.

Also, I liked how he conducted the home visits during Christmas time. It was obvious that he is not only 'performing' his duty. He talked with each person in the household. He showed a real interest in hearing how his parishioners were living, whether they needed any help, etc. Actually, this is how the visits for Christmas should look like. Those visits of parishioners' homes should integrate the community and this priest was doing exactly this. The first time that I was present during his Christmas visit I was very surprised that we were singing carols together. I never experienced this before elsewhere.

This man, his personality, his devotion and praying, and his art of communication with parishioners impressed us so much that we were going to church regularly. It was no problem to walk to church or to postpone other activities.

However, he was transferred to a different place. The people in the parish were not happy; we wrote a letter and signed a petition. I guess that all of the parishioners signed this petition. But nothing changed. I don't know the reason why he was sent to another place; nobody said anything to us. Recently, there were rumors that he was very sick. Even if this is true, I think that it was unfair. If he was sick, it was not his choice. If someone is sick, then he should be treated differently.

This made my partner and me angry. Therefore, we stopped going to church. I know that it sounds like a stupid excuse, but it was so disappointing for us. He invested so much energy to the organization and formation of the parish. It was obvious that the people were coming to him eagerly. I still can't understand why he had to go and I find it hard to accept.

Do you miss community life nowadays?

Yeah, sometimes I miss it. I went a couple of times to another church, which is close to my home. Once, I barely managed to stay there until the end of Mass and another time, I just left the church before Mass had ended. The content of the sermon and the language used by the priest there were embarrassingly low and unacceptable for me. Probably, he is an educated person because he had to complete Theology. However, his intellectual level was... I was so sorry for wasting my time!

Have you often been to Masses that were celebrated in a similar 'intellectually low' manner?

I would mention only this priest. His sentences and sermons were at an embarrassingly low intellectual level. I have a little bit of higher expectations from a priest and I have my needs. It might sound bad, but I don't want to listen to any simpletons or yahoos.

I do not want to be vulgar, but I think that some priests behave just like clerks in an institution. Sometimes I get the impression that they understand their vocation only as an occupation, profession, a good job to make a lot of money. Some of them earn more than other people do. Occasionally, I hear about priests who make comments about new parishes that they are being transferred to such as: "That's such a poor parish; people are poor and you cannot live there." That makes me wonder whether being a priest is a vocation or just a job like any other job.

Is there anything you would like to add? Do you find a place for

yourself in the Church?

For me, the Church refers to two concepts: One is the hierarchy and institution and another one is the community of believers with the same views, goals, attitudes towards God...

So, I would say that in the former, there is not much of a place for me. However, I would say that there is definitely a place for me in the community of believers. I believe that there is a place for me, but some officials of the Church simply spoil it. I believe that this is also the reason why some people simply turn away from the Church.

Even if you leave the Church, God doesn't repudiate you; He is always with you

A Young Lady, Married at a Very Young Age and Divorced, Speaks about Her Life, Relationship with God, and People in the Church

Interview with Agneshka, Belarus
Interview Held in Russian by Sergey Rajunets
Translated into English by Viktor Poletko

Key words: invalid marriage, annihilation of marriage, domestic violence, alcoholism, mental disease, lack of community support, crises of faith

When did you go to church for the first time? Please briefly describe the circumstances.

My mother is a real Truth-seeker. She was always looking for God. Before we came to the Roman Catholic Church, she had been in contact with Baptists for some time. They used to come to our home where they performed their liturgical services and sang songs. Later, she started to go to the Orthodox Church and then, she went to services of the Seventh-day Adventists.

One day, she accidentally came to a Catholic church and met a priest there. He asked her if she was married in the Church. She answered that she was not. So, he invited her to his place for directions. She was visiting him for some time and started to go to Mass. Once she took me there. I came into that church with a book. The Mass was going on at that moment, but I did not participate in it. I stood up, kneeled, or sat down like other people, but I did not really follow; I was reading my book instead. Throughout the entire summer, my mother attended Masses in this church and I came with her to read some books, fairy-tales, etc. I liked the atmosphere, the people, and the

organ playing there. I did not understand what was going on in church, but every day I went there with my mother.

Have you been baptized?

Yes, I was baptized in the Orthodox Church.

When did you finally become a believer and when did your participation in the liturgical services become more conscious?

Together with my brother, I was invited to the wedding ceremony of my parents. And when all people were receiving Communion, I approached a nun and asked if I could receive Communion as well. She answered that I couldn't. I asked her: "Why can't I follow other people?" She replied that I had to be prepared for this. So, I expressed my willingness to start the preparation. I told my parents that I wanted to receive Communion. They were very much against this. They simply wanted to have a church wedding. It was merely a nice ceremony for them. So they forbade me, but I kept asking. Then I began my preparation for First Communion and started to attend Mass. Later, my parents allowed me to participate in the choir. This is pretty much how I came to have a more conscious belief and start to participate in the Church life.

How much time did you spend on the preparation?

The preparation took two years. Consequently, I received First Communion at the age of 12, or maybe 13, I don't remember exactly. Anyway, I was very young, but I can't say that someone like my grandmother led me to this. It was my own initiative to talk to this nun. After that, she gave me the Bible and I started reading and reflecting on it.

How would you describe the situation in your parish in general? Can you speak about faith with your parish friends?

We used to do this when we were sixteen-seventeen years old. Priests conducted regular meetings for the youth. We met together and raised the questions that we wanted to discuss. Later on, however, we became interested in other things. Now it seems strange to talk about faith. People will not understand you if you come up with questions about faith. We no longer discuss the issues of faith in our parish. Though, it is still possible with certain people.

Could you discuss the questions of faith in your family or is this rather uncommon?

It is possible to talk about this at home, but every family member has his/her own position. Usually, I talk to my father and my grandmother about this. They listen to me and do not disagree, but I do not know what they think about the information they receive. In principle, we can easily talk about religion.

Let us now talk about your marriage. Please briefly describe this marriage. How old were you when you got married?

I was eighteen years old.

So it was basically at the very beginning of your age of maturity. Was everything in your marriage in accordance with Catholic canon law? Or in your case, was this marriage invalid?

Are you interested in the end of the story?

Perhaps... The end of the story will reveal for us the whole story. Maybe try to describe the marriage itself. How did you meet? Where?

I understood that the marriage was invalid much later. When we were getting married, I did not think so. I was brought up to respect an indissoluble marriage. I thought that this was a decision I made for the rest of my life.

How to describe this? My memories of that time are vague now. I cannot recognize myself, my own position, behavior, and relationships with my friends. It happened so fast. We met in February, and in October, we already got married.

Did anybody put pressure on you to get married?

There was no marriage proposal itself. There were just sorts of persuasions. He said: "I long for you. I will commit suicide if you don't marry me." At some point, I even wanted to cancel the marriage, but I was afraid to hurt him. And I was always pressured by his parents. They were saying "You are a Christian. Everyone has to bear one's cross. If you decided to help this person, you have to keep working. Only you will be able to help him."

Was it a family of believers?

Not at all! I would even say that they were militant atheists. Both of his parents suffered from alcohol addiction. His mother took narcotic drugs. Their lifestyle was definitely not Christian. There were even a few times his mother burned icons when she was drunk. His grandmother brought these icons home. She was a believer although she did not belong to any religious community. They made fun of me because I went to church every Sunday. They were against our wedding ceremony in a Catholic parish. They wanted it to take place in an Orthodox parish. We had many arguments about this. My parents insisted on the wedding being in a Catholic parish and his family didn't even want to be present there.

How did you live after the marriage? Why did you break up?

It was strange enough. I was still studying. The condition of our marriage was that my husband would find a job and start working since he wasn't studying. His parents promised me that they would help him to get a job as soon as possible. For a long time we didn't have an apartment and, therefore, we stayed with our friends. Then, we finally found an apartment. I usually studied until late at night. When I came back home, I usually found him there with his friends drinking. He spent my parents' money on alcohol. His parents promised to help us with money, but failed to do so. Thus, there was endless booze drinking with his friends.

Yet, we broke up for more terrifying reasons. He raised his hand against me. Moreover, I found out that he had a mental disorder.

So he had a mental disorder you did not know about before the marriage?

Yes. I only knew that he had a very difficult childhood and I felt sorry for him. I am generally inclined to feel sorry for people. His grandmother asked me to be especially gentle in respect to him because of his childhood. When his mother became pregnant with him, his biological father was murdered. His mother used drugs during the pregnancy. He was growing up in a very difficult environment.

He even has the bullet that killed his father. When he would become drunk, he always showed this bullet to his friends. Obviously, in such a family no child can grow up normally. Firstly, he did not have a father and, secondly, he was always told that his father was a criminal and that he is an unwanted

child. His mother became pregnant at the age of sixteen. Everybody at school and, as far as I understand, even his mother humiliated him. Thus, his family and especially his grandmother understood that I feel sorry and wish to help him. And, indeed, this was my intention. I thought that maybe he is good even though his family is bad. I believed that I could help him and everything would change. These were the most important arguments his family used to pressure me: that he would not survive without me; that I could save the world...

But you didn't know about the disease, right?

No, I didn't know. I saw some strange inclinations in his behavior. For instance, he would wear women's clothing. However, we did not really pay attention to this since, in the place where I studied, people usually don't take this kind of thing seriously. Later, however, it became worse. He would get women's manicures or use cosmetics. Later, he got many tattoos. The very lifestyle he led became very suspicious.

How long were you married?

Less than two months.

Then you broke up and...

Since then, I have never seen him.

And then you filed for a divorce?

Yes.

What about the canonical solution to the problem?

I started this procedure in the Church only after some time because it was so hard for me to do it at the beginning. All this time, I suppressed my memories; I tried to concentrate on my studies, etc. For a while, I even forgot that I needed an official confirmation that my marriage was invalid. Were it not for one nun's prompting, I would have never thought about it.

How much time has passed since you started this process?

Two and a half years.

Could you please tell me what the attitude of your fellow-parishioners towards you prior to your marriage was?

The attitude towards me was excellent. I have always been an irreplaceable parishioner. I was responsible for decorations, engaged in our choir, and people always asked me for help. That is why I was always in the spotlight. The women from our parish, especially older ones, loved me so much because I always offered them my sympathetic ear, assisted them in cleaning up, helped somebody in grief, etc. Whenever I attended the service in the church, about 30-40 people greeted me and asked me how I was doing. I like to communicate with people, and they love me too. I always knew about other people's lives and their problems. I knew what to say or when to smile. So I had very good relations with other people in our parish.

Did the attitude towards you change after breaking up with your ex-husband?

Yes. Some people spread strange rumors that I got married because I was pregnant. Then there were rumors that I had an abortion because everybody expected to see me with a baby bump. Then people started to come up to me saying: "How dare you receive Communion?" I could not believe that my private life was so actively discussed. Even now, I sometimes hear that someone denounced my deeds saying how a believer such as me could do this or that. Many people stopped talking to me. I was most surprised when people came up to me and asked: "Aren't you forbidden to receive the sacraments?" People were so curious about this issue. I answered them saying that this is none of their business and that I'll discuss it only with priests.

Did any priest help you at that time?

'To help' is too strong here, but his help consisted in the fact that he allowed me to receive Communion and to go to Confession. I am not sure that he could really help by changing the attitude of parishioners towards me. I found my alienation from other people helpful. I go to church not for the sake of people. I changed my disposition myself. Consequently, all these tensions in the parish disappeared, because people cannot discuss the same thing for a long time, so everything was forgotten.

Was there a moment after all these events, which you might describe as a loss of faith?

Yes, there was such a moment. This is because I needed some support from the people with whom I spent time. In addition, the situation in my family was difficult: My mother became seriously sick. Precisely at the moment, when I really needed support, I did not receive it. I was alone,

staying by my mother's bedside, and I did not sleep many nights. So I needed someone at least to replace me, so that I could sleep a bit. Before that, when it came to helping in church, all my friends called me first and asked me to help them, to arrange or to organize something. But when I myself needed help, I found myself alone.

Once I even went to Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, but I looked at It and could not believe that this sacramental wafer is almighty God since He does not help His people at all. Or it is better to say that I complained not so much about God, but rather about all those people who call themselves Christians, who come to church and pray so piously. In fact, they are not good; they do not help others when there is a real problem. No one even called me to ask where I had disappeared to. For two months, I did not appear in church because I constantly had to be at home with my mom. I was left alone without help. Periodically, one girl, my friend from Minsk, visited me so it was possible to relax a bit, but others didn't show any interest in me.

The only call I received was on our parish priest's birthday. People wanted me to help draw a poster. It was probably the last straw. I did not want to see them. I condemned them as Christians. I didn't have the right to condemn, because it was their own business, but I didn't understand why the Church exists at all, if going there is a mere formality for many people, instead of being a place where the love of neighbor is manifested. I did not find this love of neighbor there. And I just stopped going to church. I told God: "If Your Church is like this and if Your children are like these, then You don't exist." I told Him: "What is Your teaching then, if no one adheres to it, if no one cares about You?" I told him that if this is so, then the monstrance is just an artwork with a piece of bread in it, and in reality, His love is manifested nowhere.

Do you go to church now?

Yes. So many times, I asked for God's forgiveness for my temporarily leaving the Church. I had not been going to church for a long time.

What was the turning point, which made you attend church again?

I don't know. Even if you leave the Church, God doesn't repudiate you; He is always with you. He gives you the opportunity to go away. I cannot say that it was a turning point. I simply ordered my thoughts and made some decisions. And then, after I went to Confession, everything fell into place. I

understood that they are simply human beings, but the Bible itself and the very idea of the Church are without shortcomings. God is so perfect, and the Church is so perfect, that only we, people, spoil this concept.

When something inappropriate happens in the Church, it happens only because of people – people with their weaknesses. Of course, I would like to be wrong, but people are and will always be merely people. If you think about God in the same way as you think about people, you can lose your faith totally. I understood that the Church is not God.

I'd like to see God in the eyes of other people; I'd like them to be witnesses of God, but this is not the case. I rarely meet people through whom I can communicate with God and through whom I can see God. I understand that human beings are not perfect. That's why, whatever happens, you should not pay attention to these people. I want you to understand me correctly: By 'not paying attention to people' I only mean to realize, unfortunately and fortunately for us, that all people are weak. I said 'fortunately' because God allows this to happen.

I even prayed and asked God if it doesn't hurt Him, who created such an ideal conception of the world for our own good and who gave us freedom. What I appreciate, and am most grateful for, is that God has given me the freedom, so that I can leave Him and not even believe in Him, but He does not mind that. I hurt Him but He allows it. I can reproach Him, I can spit on Him, I can even tell everyone that He does not exist, but He does not mind. He still loves me and His attitude towards me is not changed in any way.

As for other people around, He allows them, even the priests, to be bad. But it's wonderful that the Church is made up of weak and sinful people. These ordinary people are trying to do their best. And when I realized this, life became easier. For me, the Church Herself is not as much about people; She's about God. And I attend Mass not because of people there, but because of God, who is present there. When I realized this, I immediately felt better. Of course, I would be very happy if people were kinder and supportive, but even if there are no such people, it is not God's problem and it is not the Church's problem.

One can say that you underwent a severe trial, being married at a very young age, taking pity on your husband, and hoping to save him. It was a very dark time in your life, which lasted about two months: You were beaten; you underwent other things, which you have already mentioned. Then you were separated from your

husband through secular (civil) divorce, which is a fast enough procedure. It is now about two and a half years since you started the process of the Church recognizing your marriage as invalid, which is usually a lingering process. How do you feel about the fact that, on the one hand, you can consider your marriage to be invalid, but, on the other hand, officially, it is not yet recognized as invalid? How do you reconcile these two realities?

You know, curiously enough, I remain very calm, because of one experience I had on the night of December 25. At that time, I asked God to show me how to behave, to give me a certain situation, even a very difficult one, so that I know how to behave. After this service, the worst things happened.

Are you still talking about your marriage?

Yes. It became so obvious that God allowed such a situation. He gave it to me to understand how to behave. I am not the kind of person who easily refuses to face some challenges. I said to myself: If it's necessary to live all my life with this man, it will be revealed to me through some situation. And, on the contrary, if this is simply impossible, then something irreparable will happen, like I will be killed, or something will fall on me, or whatever. And God allowed this to happen. I firmly believe that everything has happened according to His will: He let me go because He does not want me to feel bad.

I don't think that my Father wants me to be beaten and insulted. My Father wishes only good things for me. I sincerely asked Him to forgive me for this, and He knows my thoughts, because I wanted my marriage to be once and for all, but if it does not work out, then He does not want me to suffer all of my life. Yes, I could sacrifice my life for nothing, although I don't think such a life would last for a long time, to devote myself to save a man who destroys both himself and me, and the result would be in vain. But I have many qualities that could be used more appropriately, so that I could really help someone more effectively. That is why I didn't doubt that I was doing nothing wrong, nothing inappropriate, whatever people say. I experience how God is present in my life, how He has led me and has helped me. I don't think that when I die God is going to take my divorce into consideration. Maybe I have some sinful thoughts or my conclusions are far-fetched, but my life was transformed and I myself changed a lot.

The examination of your case has been going on for two and a

half years already. In your opinion, how much more time will it take and how long do you have to wait?

I do not know how long it will last. It may take 1-2 years in the best case but potentially up to 6-7 years. This is our Catholic court and it is unclear what they want. What makes me the sickest is that my fate is in the hands of people and not God. That some people have decided that they have the right to rule my destiny, to twist it as they wish, to scrutinize it as if under a microscope, to know everything. These people will decide my fate, and I have serious doubts regarding this. They are merely people. They have the power to give and not to give.

Are you waiting for the end of the annulment process alone, or do you have someone who is waiting for this decision with you?

I have a relationship with one man.

Is he a believer?

Yes.

Does he attend the same church as you?

We are both Catholics, but of different rites.

If you belong to different rites of the Catholic Church, is canon law the same for both of you?

Yes.

So, he is waiting with you. It appears, then, that not only you are suffering. Is he willing to wait?

It seems that he is.

The Church pushes me into a place where I do not want to be and where I should not be

A Perplexing Experience of the Marriage Annulment Process

Interview with John, Czech Republic
Interview Held in English
by Petr Jandejsek and Michaela Jandejsková

Key words: charismatic movements, ecumenical relations, divorcee, marriage annulment, second marriage, pastoral of divorced people

First, I would like to ask you how you would describe your faith and relation to the Church in your early years and then during your first marriage.

I did not grow up in a family that would go to church. Although my mom was a believer, it was only after the revolution in 1989 that she started taking my sisters and me to church. Fortunately, for me, or at least I consider it fortunate, I found many friends there. So, I started going to church and asking myself questions concerning religious issues when I was around ten years old.

I went to church very often at that time because we played the guitars there in a music group. My friends and I used to go to various Christian charismatic meetings too. The Catholic Church did not organize those meetings. There, I met people from various Christian churches: Catholics and Protestants. Very often, we had a guest there who talked to us. It could have been a Catholic priest or a priest from another Church. Maybe, that is one of the reasons why I have never really had any prejudices regarding other Churches and denominations; I have known people from these Churches from the very beginning and I liked them. I spiritually grew up there. It was at these meetings where I started asking questions about what I believe in. I started

reading books about it.

My faith evolved when I moved to the capital to study. I also met my wife there. Actually, she is my ex-wife. It was at the time when I was, I do not want to say active because I was not active in the Church, but I would say active concerning my faith in the sense of what I read, how I prayed, etc. I used to go to church at least once a week but I also went, at least weekly, to the youth group meetings of the Czech Brethren Church, which were very charismatic and lively. And that was what I sought at that time.

Already, at that time, I was very much interested in eastern religions and especially Buddhism. I read lots of books about Buddhism and meditation.

I think that is what I was like during my marriage, or at least at the beginning of the marriage.

Did you marry in the Church?

Yes, we got married in the Church. My ex-wife was not really a believer; she never really practiced her faith although she was baptized in the Orthodox Church. However, she was a seeker and was interested in other spiritualities as well. We had many conversations concerning religious issues. We understood each other very well even though she did not share my more communal view of the Church. She regarded it more as a personal thing.

Did you go to church together sometimes?

At the beginning, she went very often with me but, later on, she usually stayed at home and I went by myself.

Then, during the crisis and following the break-up of your marriage, who or what helped you to fight the difficulties?

It happened shortly after I finished my theological studies, a year or two after. I think that the biggest support and help that I received was from my friends with whom I studied Theology. They knew the circumstances. They knew what it was like to be divorced within the Catholic Church and how difficult it was for me.

So, there were people around you; you were not alone.

Yes, I did not feel alone in this way.

Do you consider these people the Church? Obviously, they were

Christians because you said you studied Theology with them. Would you distinguish between them and the Church?

The Church Herself did not support me. I knew those people from university. We used to go to student Masses here in Prague though they were coming from various denominations. After the Mass, we would go to the pub and talk. So, we kind of had our own community. With them, I could discuss my problems when they were a kind of burning issue for me.

In what way did your attitude towards the Catholic Church change after the break-up of your marriage? Was there a shift in your personal faith as well?

I would not say that there was a shift in my personal faith. I think that I believed in the same way as before but there was a shift in my understanding and in the point from which I viewed the social policy of the Church. Suddenly, I appeared on the edge, somewhere in the void, as I would call it. It was not really a problem here in Prague because it is a big city but it felt a little bit different when I went to my hometown, which is very small. There, people knew that I was about to divorce and then, I divorced. Nobody was making a big issue out of it. But, still for me, it felt strange.

So, this is what you call the social policy of the Church.

Yes. I felt that it was unfair to me because I tried to do a lot to save the marriage. Although I know that there are always two people involved in a break-up, I felt like I was the one who did less damage to our marriage. So, I felt like I was on the edge even though I did not want to be there.

The feeling of being on the edge was your internal feeling?

Yes, it was my internal feeling and I withdrew from being active in the Church. Before that, I used to read the readings and was active in the church in my hometown. I was in a music group there too. I planned on being more active in the parish, which I joined after leaving the student parish. But, because of this, and because I felt like I could be verbally attacked by some people for not really being a good person I did not make an effort to take part in any activities.

So, you protected yourself in advance.

Yes, it was like this. I did not want to give people the opportunity to have some objections towards me.

You have a girlfriend now. How does it feel now with respect to your specific personal situation?

It felt very strange at the beginning when we started going out with each other, especially for her. I can say, that for her, it was a really tough question of whether to start the relationship or not. We talked about it a lot. In her family, there have been divorces; there is even a homosexual affair. Even though they are a religious family, they are, I don't want to say liberal in this sense, but they are very tolerant. They are Roman Catholics. Well, half of her family is not religious and these people, affected by divorces, come from this half. Her part of the family is religious but it does not mean that they would neglect the other part. They are on very good terms. They keep in touch and they have very close relations. Although she had this experience, it was still difficult for her. It was more difficult for her than it was for me. It felt strange, but at that time, I was in love, and I couldn't help myself.

And how is it now?

I felt like she wanted to get married. We both knew that we would like to get married in the Catholic Church because both of us feel at home in this Church. Seventy-five percent of our friends are Catholics. So we both wanted it, but for quite a long time, I did not want to appeal to the canonical court for an annulment of my first marriage because it was difficult for me. I did not consider the marriage vows to be meaningless. They were very serious for me. So, there were lots and lots of internal questions. I would not say that they solved themselves but somehow, they gradually became less and less important. I mean time healed it.

We have been together for more than seven years now. During the first three or four years, we talked about it sometimes; we even asked each other whether one of us would agree to get married in a Church other than the Roman Catholic Church. We did not really have a problem with it. But then, we felt like this: Okay; we could get married in another Church but it would not feel right. It would feel like going around the rules and that was what we did not want to do. I still have internal questions concerning the cancellation or annulment of my previous marriage. But in the end, I thought that if I did not go for it or if I at least did not try, it would affect not only my girlfriend but our children as well, if we had any.

So, in the end, I asked for it more than a year ago. I appealed to the canonical court for the annulment. It is in progress. Two or three weeks ago, I received the judgment of the tribunal of first instance. It has been judged that

my previous marriage is annulled. However, it has to be approved by the tribunal of second instance in Prague. A person whom I know assured me that it would be almost a formality. It is almost sure that I will be able to marry in the Catholic Church 'again'.

The tribunal of first instance was in my diocese. The judgment was in my favor because the witnesses whom I called gave a testimony, which helped me very much. One witness was my mom and the other one was a sister of my ex-wife. Moreover, they called one more witness of their choice whose testimony was in my favor too.

On the one hand, you had difficulties with the whole process; on the other hand, you had a positive motivation to proceed.

Yes, this is the point on which I do not agree with the Church policy. If the Church allows me to marry once again, my previous marriage has to be annulled. It means that the marriage had never happened legally. And that's something I am not happy with. I wanted to marry my ex-wife. I did it willingly. I did not plan to divorce, never. I really wanted to marry her. And now, I have to agree that it had never legally happened. That was one of the biggest questions I had to solve. If it were a divorce, it would be a lot easier. Well, not easier but I would be happier with it.

Would it be more true to reality?

Yes, exactly.

How did your family react to the fact that your first marriage ended?

They were sad but from the very beginning, they supported me.

Before we split up, it was as if my wife changed into a totally different person, as if she went mad in some way. She did really silly things. One of the silly things – I call them silly things because after some time she called them that as well – she left me for a man who she met somewhere. She lived with him for a little while, and then, she begged me to allow her to come back. I accepted it but the relationship had been broken already.

My parents knew about it. So, when the divorce came, they knew that I had had a difficult time with her. They knew that I tried to make it better. That is why they have never been against me. From the very beginning, they said: "It is sad but we really do not know what to say because we have never gone

through such a thing.”

And how do they view your new partner?

I think that they like her. There was a time gap between my relationships. There was nobody for a while. I think that my parents were quite happy when I brought somebody home.

You said that you worked for a school that is related to the Church. Did your divorce have any repercussions at work? Was it discussed at work? Or perhaps, some difficulties came from it?

No. It was discussed but not officially. It was very much discussed with my colleagues because they were another group of people who supported me a lot. They knew my ex-wife and after some time, they told me that she was a nice person but sometimes, she behaved strangely. They were happy for me, that we split up in the end.

The head of my department was also divorced and she knew my current girlfriend from her childhood, actually, since she was born. So, she was very happy when my girlfriend and I got together. Her daughter and my girlfriend have been good friends since they were kids. My girlfriend was the maid of honor at her daughter’s wedding. A month ago, she became the godmother of her child. So there is a close connection, on a personal level, between my former head of the department and me.

The director of the school never made an issue of it either, even though he knew about my situation. To sum it up, there has never been a problem concerning my school.

So it was considered your personal matter?

Yes. I think that it would have been different if I had had psychological or other problems, if I had not been able to teach. It did not happen. I was not reproached because of being divorced.

Would you like to see any changes in the Church’s teaching on marriage in light of what you have experienced? What should be changed, if anything, in the way the Church treats people and what She teaches about marriage?

I think that the Church should seriously talk about pastoral care for divorced people. Because I really felt like I was in a void. I did not know what

I could do, what I couldn't do, what I should do, what I shouldn't do. Nobody was really able to tell me these things. Is it okay to go to the Eucharist? Is it not? For some people it is, for some people it is not. I think that pastoral care should be better. The Church should not pretend like there are no such people in the Church. The Church should be aware that there are lots of divorced people in the Church.

So, some care should start but it should not be led by priests. Because I think and I feel that a priest is somebody who has not gone through such an experience. They should be either married people or people who have, at least in their family, such an experience, so that they know how difficult it is. The Church should care about such people.

The other thing is that, as we talked about it, there is a very big difference between annulment and divorce.

In what way?

On a personal level, I think that it is a big lie and it is the thing that bothers me the most. The Church presses me into the situation where I have to say that I have never legally been in a relationship. That is not true for me. Actually, the Church pushes me into a place where I do not want to be and where I should not be, I think.

And there is one more thing. I felt very discouraged and very down when I found out that there were people in the Church who had been in a relationship and had children in that relationship. However, even though they left their partners and the kids, because they had not been married in the Church, they could get married in the Church. That was not a problem!? I know such people and that was very difficult for me to grasp. I had no kids but only a relationship that failed and I was put into a more difficult situation than people who abandoned their families and their children and started a new life with someone else. This was okay for the Church in terms of canon law.

Moreover, a marital status in the Church affects many other things. For example, there are places, especially small towns, where the kids of remarried people would not be accepted to attend catechism classes, etc.

The most difficult thing for me is that the Church legally pushes me into a situation where I do not want to be. And the person who has abandoned a family is legally, in the eyes of the Church, a better person than you.

A Divorced and Remarried Catholic on Being Excluded from Sacramental Life

Essay Written by Iris, Romania

Translated from Romanian into English by the Author

Key words: re-married person, lack of family support, being 'watched', lack of sacrament of Holy Communion

I was born 37 years ago in a quite traditional Greek-Catholic family. Even during the communist times, we used to go to church every Sunday and on holydays. When I was around 8 or 9, I went to catechism classes too. My family was really active with respect to 'practicing' the faith.

The turning point of my life was when I got divorced. I had one child and at that time, there was nobody willing to help me. On the contrary, I had the impression that everybody was against me. My family didn't understand me either. There was lack of communication in my marriage, but in my family's opinion, it wasn't a good enough reason to get divorced. I was also afraid of what other people were going to say, and especially those who were the churchgoers. I was the black sheep of the family... There was nobody in my family who had had a broken marriage.

I felt quite isolated. There was a lot of gossip, and many false and unfair opinions. I continued to go to church but not as often as before. It felt like everyone was looking at me, as if I had done the worst possible thing in the world... I simply didn't find my place within the Church.

After a few years, I got married again. My husband is a Greek Catholic and a divorcee as well. There is no chance of us getting remarried in the Church. It would be possible to marry in the Orthodox Church but we don't want to do it since we were raised as Catholics and we do not want to give up our faith. Therefore, we were only married in a civil ceremony. After a while, my

parents accepted our relationship. However, there are still members of my family who do not accept me as I am, so there is just a superficial relationship between us.

We go to church every Sunday again, but we are avoiding some churches because we feel like we are being ‘watched’. Our greatest regret is the fact that we cannot receive Holy Communion. Once we talked to a priest about it, and he clearly told us that we can go to Confession, but we will not be pardoned; thus, we cannot move any further towards receiving Communion. We cannot lie in Confession or go to a priest who doesn’t know us, as this would be yet another sin.

We are aware that we are not fully accepted and it feels like we are living a kind of ‘double life’. We know that as Catholics we have to obey the rule that there is only one marriage. However, I know that it was better for my child and for me to take this step rather than stay in a marriage that didn’t work.

I believe that there are much greater sins than getting remarried. I also believe that by not accepting such people like us, the Church is losing too.

A Divorced Woman Calls for a More Pastoral Attitude towards the ‘Unprivileged’

Essay Written by Regi, Poland
Translated from Polish into English
by Agnieszka Anna Ukleja

Key words: traditional family, clergy, believing without belonging, pedophilia, sexuality, domestic violence

I was born in Poland and brought up by a very religious family. I went regularly to church. I used to read to my deeply believing grandmother Holy Scripture and stories on the lives of the Saints. Already as a young girl, I had my doubts about the honesty of Church officials and members of the Church.

My grandmother was one of the worst people that I have met in my life. However, she was highly appreciated by the clergy. She made large financial contributions to the Church during the difficult times of communism; the parish priests were invited for dinner, etc. She would go to church every day instead of helping her hard working children. She would use physical violence against her children as a way of punishing them for not attending Sunday Mass.

I had to face all these complex family situations believing that everything that happened ‘in the name of God’, ‘thanks to God’, or ‘God so wanted’ was unfair and abnormal. Back then, I just could not believe that it was God’s will that the parents of four children died in a car accident. Neither today do I believe that God had something to do with it.

I am ‘a big believer’, and even when my 21-year-old son became very ill from a malignant form of cancer with metastases, I continued to believe that God had nothing to do with that! I am grateful to the people who supported me and to God for giving me incredible strength to overcome all difficulties. I am

sorry, but I would never sacrifice my own child to prove my love to God. I do not think that God expects a human sacrifice. What He expects and wants from us is: honesty, support for the weaker, not having anger and hatred for people who have hurt us, and simple tolerance and sympathy for people and animals.

God really exists. He is not a bearded man from the paintings of my grandmother; He is not about prohibitions and injunctions, which still circulate somewhere in my memory. God is highly intelligent and certainly has a sense of humor.

Jesus Christ will always be a paragon for me. However, wholeheartedly and fully conscious, I reject the institutional Church and the Vatican for their financial scandals. Many among the clergy, who should be our spiritual leaders, are pedophiles. It suffocates me when I think about the parents who in confidence sent their children to Catholic boarding schools and about those teachers and principals who have abused them.

I find it quite strange that the clergy is against discussions about sexuality. I would like to emphasize that I have much respect for intimacy. Nevertheless, I don't think that there is anything wrong with people discussing their sexuality. It's rather abnormal that the Church forbids the use of condoms and as a consequence thousands of Africans suffer from AIDS.

Also, I do not agree with the rejection of homosexual people. They are normal people, just of a different sexual orientation. I also disagree with the scale of toleration by people towards pedophilia. Instead of going to jail, the parish priests who abused the children are transferred to other parishes where they continue their pastoral work.

What is wrong with wanting to have a child, even though it is by means of artificial fertilization? If the State allows it and if medicine makes it possible, why should we not use it? Personally, if I had to face this problem, I would choose adoption, which would give a child without parents a chance to have a better life.

As a divorced person, the clergy rejects me. They communicate with me as if they are communicating with a neglected dog. They would consider it more proper and honest if I stayed in my marriage and if my husband continued to abuse my child and me!

With all my strength, I try to live honestly; very often, I speak with God and I express my gratitude for being healthy. Frankly speaking, I do not look

at all for a dialogue with the Church, but instead, I look for direct contact with God. I think that our God has a big sense of humor.

I wish everybody all the best, and I hope that I did not offend anyone.

I cannot relate to the Church, because I don't feel Her spirit at all

A Young Woman who is in a Relationship with a Divorced Man Talks about Her Life in 'Exile'

Essay Written by Nija, Slovenia
Translated from Slovenian into English
by Agnieszka Anna Ukleja

Key words: Sunday school, laicization of priest, married priest, discovering religion, belonging, Confession, traditional values, cohabitation, lost faith

I went to church this Christmas. It has been years since I have gone to a Christmas Mass, even though I used to love them. They lost all their charm for me when my grandmother died a few years ago, and I could no longer visit her for a cup of tea at 2 AM after the Vigil Mass had ended.

My parents never went to church with me. We always met afterwards, just for tea and cookies. I think that it had something to do with the fact that my mother was forced to write with her right hand at Sunday school despite being left-handed.

I knew why my father didn't go; his father was an ex-priest who left the Church after the Second World War. My dad grew up in a strange marriage of a former priest who loved his books and a girl who was 25 years younger than he was; she simply needed a husband because her fiancé was shot during the war like so many other young men. They never talked about those 25 years that my grandfather had spent as a priest. In his own words, that was another life. He died about a year before I was born. Fascination with his life and his work were the major factors contributing to me wanting to study Theology. My uncle often tells me that I am incredibly like him and that he would love knowing me. I imagine that he would also understand me better than most of my family.

I started going to church because all my cousins were going and they

always excluded me since I was a non-churchgoer. They chose to be mean in a way only small kids can be. I regularly found my toys stolen or destroyed after every time they came for a visit. It was only after I was baptized at the age of 7 and started to spend time with them at Sunday school that my Barbie dolls kept their legs and clothes.

At that time, I remember feeling great peace in the church. I loved the smell and dark ambience of churches. I felt safe there. I had all the answers, and, most importantly, I started feeling as if I belonged to the rest of my family too, not just my parents.

Then, when I was 12, my cousin died in a car accident. I was shattered. There was no longer that sense of peace and beauty. Church became a place for tears and funerals. Nevertheless, I received the sacrament of Confirmation. I remember having to write a list of sins and a nun who was preparing us for Confirmation remarked that my list most certainly wasn't long enough. I rewrote my sins, but it was my last Confession. I felt that nobody had the right to know about my mistakes, and, surely, I alone could forgive myself for my mistakes. Or sins, if you prefer.

My own mistake, as it turned out, in my case, it is very difficult or even impossible to forgive myself. When my life had taken some serious turns and I had made some serious mistakes, it was then that I realized why they are called sins. I could not receive absolution for it anyway. One can never go back. No absolution can give me that. Although, I must say, I sometimes look back nostalgically to the sense of relief I felt after Confession as a child.

Let me return to where I started this essay: the Christmas Mass. This year we went to the morning Mass, not to the midnight Mass. My partner and I were visiting his kids, his ex-wife, her new partner, and his kids, and we all had dinner together. We stayed at their place. There was no time for Mass at midnight; we were busy catching up with the kids whom we don't get a chance to see so often since they live in another country. The only reason why I went to Mass in the morning was that I did not want to set a bad example for the kids and to spoil their Catholic upbringing. So we went, the unlikely family, all of us. The church was so full that they actually organized a service in a nearby cinema. There were so many people that I couldn't even hear the priest speak, let alone see anything. After less than 15 minutes, my partner's son said that this was nonsense; it was like magic since we couldn't hear a thing and we were just copying gestures and repeating prayers from other people.

We - my partner and I - decided that he was right so we left the service and walked by the river instead, chatting. The child was asking very deep questions about physics and the nature of the universe. That felt closer to Christmas and its mysteries. He was laughing and saying that it would be better to watch the Mass on TV and to kneel on his own carpet. It reminded me of my grandmother and her cynical remarks about silly people not knowing what they are doing half of the time.

After the service, we took both of the kids and drove to his parents' house. His mother outdid herself with baking, and we had a wonderful dinner and watched old Czech fairy tales. His parents are wonderful people, and I think that they have learned to love me. However, I will never forget the first time that I met his mother. After 15 minutes, she burst out saying, "Oh, I so wish he had met you first! Then, everything would be just fine."

The next day, we all went to church because it was my partner's 'name day', and his mother wouldn't accept any excuse for not going to church. I sat next to two elderly women who were whispering and looking at us. I heard my partner whisper to his brother: "This will cause a good argument at home."

The priest gave a long and passionate homily about the importance of traditional family values, and how we, that is Christians, are fighting a war against those who oppose it. I felt like screaming. To whom is he talking? Most of my Christian friends do not live in what he probably considers traditional families, but I dare to say that we live in loving ones. Surely, that is what matters to God, right? Everything that I love in life would be taken away from me if he was right. My grandfather would have never left the priesthood, gotten married, and had children and grandchildren. I would not even exist. My partner would still live with his wife and they would probably both be unhappy. I would not have my better half. So many stories like this and yet the priest is not only speaking about it, but also waging a war against it. What am I even doing here?

When the choir sang "*Te missa est*", I asked what the whole whispering was about. My partner smiled mischievously and said: "Well, those ladies you were sitting next to know my brother and me. They were even at my wedding. You will cause quite the gossip and my parents won't be happy. Nothing to worry about. It will pass."

"Then perhaps we should walk out of the church holding hands with your brother," I suggested, only half joking. His brother laughed aloud and said: "That would solve all our family problems." We were still giggling when we

went outside, not holding hands.

His partner, Robert, never comes home with him for Christmas. Maybe it would be different if there were a form of recognition for us, exiles, even if not for our own sake. I learned how to deal with these things a long time ago. I no longer want a church wedding even though I still think that they are beautiful. It may be that my partner's mother would sleep better at night if she thought that her sons no longer lived in sin. It bothers me that my decisions may hurt her, and I feel that the passionate homilies of her parish priest don't help with that.

I lost my faith years ago. It is extremely difficult to be without it when something senseless happens. So, I still read the Psalms right after receiving the news that my best friend had died suddenly. I even felt comforted by their beauty, but I felt that neither God nor the Church could fill the emptiness that lingered behind. I still feel that way.

Nonetheless, I believe in goodness when my cat comes and insists on purring in my lap even when I am typing an essay or when I wake up from a dream where I was just chatting with him who has been dead now for months, and I for a minute or two stop missing him. I see something close to divinity in these things. If I was blessed again with the faith that I had as a child, I could surely feel the presence of a loving God. Since I am but an adult skeptic, I must be satisfied with the dark church on Good Friday and the smell of incense, with doubt and hope.

A Young Lady Converted from Catholicism and Finds Her Way in the Orthodox Church

Interview with Aga, Poland

Interview Held in Polish by Katarzyna Remża

Translated into English by Agnieszka Anna Ukleja

Key words: convert, Polish Orthodox Church, divorcee, annulment of marriage, mixed marriage, ecumenism

You changed your denomination; how did this happen? When did this happen?

At first, I was a Catholic, baptized and believing. I was in an oasis. However, after my Confirmation, things became a bit slippery. This coincided with pedophilia scandals in the Church and discoveries that the Church representatives in Poland cooperated with the communist regime. These were only additional arguments to convince me that it was not for me. I began to doubt whether the resurrection and other miracles were possible and whether they really happened.

In high school, I decided to be an atheist. I did not go to church for one year. After some time, I found it terribly difficult. It began to overwhelm me because I had to establish all the rules in my life from the beginning, and to figure out the meaning of life. I came to the conclusion that if there is no life after death, it is pointless to believe. The only thing that I would have left behind me would have been the memories of my family. Therefore, I understood that this could be the only thing I had to care about in this life. Even momentary pleasure or the pursuit of general happiness, wealth, and so on would be pointless. Everybody will die so it makes no difference in how I live. Atheism was so hard for me.

Once, just after the death of Pope John Paul II, we had a discussion in the class about different theologies. Everyone started to say what he or she believed in. Since we were students of art school, our views were different. One girl was a Jehovah's Witness. The other fellow student said she was interested in Orthodoxy. I did not know much about it. She said that she believed it is a religion that is closest to the true Christianity. She said that she could bring me a book *The Pilgrim's Tale*. She did not change her denomination since she was afraid of hurting her parents and sisters who are highly devoted Catholics.

Six months later, I got accepted into university. During our art history course, we discussed early Christian art, icons, and their location. Additionally, we learnt a lot about Orthodoxy. We were invited to read some literature so I began to read more. In general, I began to be interested in different religions. There was no intention to choose one, but I did it simply out of curiosity. In the past, there used to be a popular social networking site called *grono.net*. I had a lot of those discussions there. I remember I liked talking with Jehovah's Witnesses. Conversations with them inspired me to look for evidence in the Scriptures because I remembered things were not the way they said they were. That's how I went back to basics, to the Scriptures. I found a forum for Orthodox people in Poland, which was the only well-functioning forum from which I learned the most.

Once I heard from a young Orthodox guy, who was an altar boy in an Orthodox church in the city I lived in, and he invited me to join the Liturgy. I asked him if it would not be weird, assuming only 10 people would show up for the Liturgy and that everyone would look at me, and I would not know how to behave. He explained that I did not have to worry about anything because many people were expected to come. Also, it was normal that people come there out of curiosity. I went once and from then on, I went more and more frequently.

I did not dig into the dogma of Catholicism, perhaps because I knew it. Back then, I was alienated. I lost my confidence in the Church. There was no authority for me in the Church especially in Poland. Religious oases repelled me. They were so fanatical like a kind of sect where everybody rejoices. There was no space for normal conversation. It was only about singing and waving hands.

I started reading a lot of Orthodox theological literature, which was not available very much in Poland. I wanted to learn how to make the sign of a cross, how many times and when during the Liturgy to do it, how to make a

good Confession. In the Orthodox Church, when you prepare as a child for First Communion, you do not receive a book of prayers and formulas of how to confess. I missed a little bit of guidelines; however, I began going to church regularly.

At last, I do not know why I made up my mind to convert. I went to the priest here in my city and said that I wanted to become Orthodox. He said that I had to go through the preparatory period during which we would meet every week or every two weeks. He gave me some books. He was there to respond to my questions in case of doubt. So we met a few times a month. This lasted for 2-3 years. Already then, I felt that I belonged to that community, but I did not know when the right moment was.

One day, in December 2009, on the day of the patron saint of the church in my city, he said: "It has been too long. It's time you wrote a letter to the bishop."

"A letter to the Bishop? What should I write there?"

"Write why you want to join; I will send this request to him. When he agrees, you will have to go to Confession and Communion."

I got scared. Everything was arranged within a month. That's how I entered the new community.

Can you tell me what actually made you so interested in Orthodoxy; what attracted you that you were missing in the 'previous life'?

First of all, I agreed with all of their dogmas. They were historically grounded; in the course of history, they have not been so much influenced by some external interests. Sometimes, the popes changed dogmas because they were corrupted. For example: the selling of indulgences; the Orthodox Church do not recognize the doctrine of purgatory or the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception.

Secondly, it gives a believer more freedom and higher responsibility. This differs from Catholicism, which I feel is built up on the tradition of judicial injunctions and prohibitions, and everything is written in the law. It's clear when you commit a mortal sin, and when you commit a venial one, when you can go to Communion, and when you cannot. Everything is fixed. And in Orthodoxy you settle everything within your own conscience. At the same time, you are more responsible; you cannot cheat yourself. There is no

statement that contraception is bad, but it is said that it can be either good or bad. And so it is with everything in the world, with money or even with love. If the spouses do not believe they have the money for a child and it is known that they do not have it and use contraception, they have committed no sin. The consequence is: There is no need to deceive yourself. There is no great dilemma in deciding whether to go to Confession, to lie, or to hide the truth.

Is it easier to apply the teaching of the Orthodox Church in your everyday life?

Yes. For example, the teaching on marriage and divorce. Although the possibility of divorce was forced by some emperor ages ago, they adapted it and it works well. It is not like in Catholicism in which you made your vow once and it's done. In Catholicism, you have to appeal to a court and prove that your marriage was invalid in the first place.

In the Orthodox Church, if you try hard to save the relationship and it still does not work, it's possible that they made a mistake and because everyone makes mistakes, you can get a divorce. There is no marriage without love. I now know that if I happen to marry in the Church with my recent partner, it has to be out of love. When my ex-husband and I came to the conclusion that we do not love each other anymore, do not get along, that nothing could be done about it, it made no sense that in the Catholic Church I was still considered to be his wife.

We have not been together for 2.5 years. Since June 2012, we have been divorced civilly after 2 years of marriage. The annulment process of our marriage is pending. It is a strange situation: I have requested it already as an Orthodox convert, who does not believe in the existence of this marriage, but I still have to prove it. I know in my conscience that I am not his wife, but I have to prove it. It can take a really long time. Because this marriage is still valid on paper, I am still considered to be married and I cannot marry my new partner, whom I love. The point is that there is no trust. They don't look at real life situations but at what's binding legally. The priest told me that there are big chances of annulment, but for the last 8 months, nothing has changed. It makes no sense.

As a convert, do you see the difference in how the teaching of the Catholic Church influenced your personal decisions in the past and how the Orthodox Church does now?

Yes, I can see it. If I had been born as an Orthodox, it would have been

easier for me in the Catholic Church now. But because I left the Catholic Church for another Church, no matter what form it takes, I am treated by the Catholic Church as an atheist. This was the case during our wedding. The marriage could not be celebrated as between a Christian and a Christian, but from the legal point of view, it was treated as a wedding between a Christian and a non-Christian. Even the priest who assisted at our wedding disagreed. It was a paradox.

I had to sign a declaration that I would not interfere in the upbringing of our children. We had to do it in front of witnesses: my mother, brother, and my former husband. We signed it even though we both did not want to, and none of the people present believed in it.

The priest was terribly ashamed and apologized for that procedure explaining that it was necessary paperwork. The thing is that the Orthodox Church has exactly the same procedure. It stems from the long-term disagreement between these two Churches. The priest also felt stupid because our marriage could not be conducted as between two Catholics, and in the end, it looked different. It's possible that it could have been conducted in an invalid way; who knows... The priest gave Communion to everyone, including me. It was not supposed to happen. Orthodox people believe that Communion is a sign of belonging. Some more zealous Orthodox could say that I returned to Catholicism. Luckily, our Orthodox priest is quite ecumenical. He told me that there was no problem in receiving Communion.

Do the closest people that surround you treat you differently because you are a convert?

I was surprised with the reactions. Surprisingly, people who I thought would represent the greatest opposition didn't react at all. Those from whom I expected to make no difference reacted the most.

When it comes to my family, only my mother felt that she didn't take enough care of my religious upbringing. Dad is very interested in the Orthodox Church. Recently, there was a 100th anniversary of Her existence in Poland. On this occasion a lot was going on and there were many celebrations. My dad was angry that I did not inform him about it, suggesting he would come, had I invited him.

I'm a daddy's girl; he just won't allow anybody to say anything bad about me. When we met together to inform my parents and parents' of my ex-husband about the engagement and wedding details, I told everybody I

converted to Orthodoxy. As parents of my former husband reacted badly to the news, my dad really stood in my defense. He said that after all this is also Christianity and that I'm not doing it for show. Once I received a call from him and he said that I was a wonderful, great, and truly believing Christian. He was proud that I found my own, true way.

My brothers do not care. Other members of our immediate family don't know. One grandmother is dead, and the other does not know. She is a big believer and follows *Radio Maryja*. I could tell her, but I think she would feel disappointed. It's more about my mom; she asked me not to tell my grandma because she is sure that she would call her and ask her to make me change my mind. Granny thinks that since she is the oldest and has the most experience, she has the most to say. She is convinced that parents should have an impact on their children. I want my mom to be at peace.

I know that members of our non-immediate family know because I told one cousin and the news had spread. There is no big discussion going on. Sometimes, my uncle says: "That's a different religion. But it is okay. It is still Christianity. It is important that a man finds his way." He doesn't know how to name things, but he wants to support me.

Priests have always responded well though I always fear to say I have converted and left the Church for another one. It sounds as if I have given up on it. When I went to the parish where I was baptized to ask the priest to notify my conversion in the parish documents, it was quite obvious he was moved. He gave me the papers and said goodbye. But from everyone else, I get good reactions; everyone always talks about icons and Christ-prayers.

My friends reacted the most negatively, especially those who almost never go to church. They said Orthodoxy was a fabrication and that we were brought up in Catholicism. I was very surprised because this comment came from a colleague that doesn't care about the Church. She had her child baptized because everybody does it. She was pregnant at the wedding. Very Christian...

The other friend called it a temporary fascination in the same way as in the past there was a flourishing popularity of yoga and Buddhism. Yet another friend proposed to meet a Catholic priest suggesting that I made a hasty decision. He said that Catholicism is the same, that I might just think that Orthodoxy is so cool, that Catholics also have nice songs, icons, and the Tridentine Mass. It always bugs me terribly. These 'lukewarm Catholics' do not understand that it is not the exotic otherness and nice icons that attract

me. Their attitude stems from the fact that they know nothing about religion and theology, including the Catholic one.

Do you feel discriminated? Would you describe it in this way?

Yes, I am discriminated legally by the Catholic Church. But most of this is probably only in my head. I'm sensitive. I work for a Polish Catholic magazine. I have been working there for a couple of years and nobody knows, even my closest co-workers, about my conversion. Sometimes, I am caught in situations in which I point out certain mistakes in the text and everybody is surprised how I know so much about Orthodox theology. I usually answer that I study ethnology, and I'm interested in old rites.

On the first day of work, I was asked about the name of my parish. I could not say that I was Orthodox. The general rule is that we're all Catholics here! I gave the name of the Catholic parish to which I go to with my new partner.

We are expecting a new boss at work. He is associated with the ecumenical group to which he once belonged. One of the colleagues commented on that: "He is too ecumenical. I hope we will continue as the Catholic magazine, not as a Jewish-Protestant one." I thought to myself: What would be wrong with making it more ecumenical? I stay out of these conversations; I don't want to provoke people. At work, we all pray together; our presence is obligatory; then, I make the sign of the cross according to the Catholic way.

I do not know why I have such a distorted image of Catholicism. Perhaps, I have never come across a good priest. When scandals happen within the Orthodox community, I do not care much. People make scandals and not the Church. Our community in Poland is very small. Perhaps, it would be different if I lived in Greece where 95% of people belong to the Orthodox Church. Similarly to how the Orthodox Greeks could complain about issues concerning the Orthodox Church, if I was a Catholic in Poland, maybe, I would also complain about priests buying expensive watches and elegant cars and that they get too involved in state matters. In Poland, it does not look like that for the Orthodox Church. But it may also result from the fact that Orthodox priests have families; they are more rooted in real life and the real needs of people.

Do you see any possibility of returning to the Catholic Church?

No. I cannot imagine that. I mean, I had a moment when I was not Orthodox. But I was on the way to become one. I thought that I did not

belong in the Catholic Church and that I was raised in a completely different world. The change is difficult and it takes time to implement the new system. There was a moment when I noticed that I started to think differently, for example, about the world, about the meaning of sin, about what I'm doing...

My new partner and I go to a Catholic church on one Sunday and on another Sunday, we go to an Orthodox church. In fact, we go to a Catholic church more often because there are more possibilities. However, in a Catholic church, I feel more like a spectator. I mean, I pray; I'm not passive. I say all the formulas and from the outside I behave like a Catholic. But I do not feel it is my Church. I have nothing against Catholics. I have nothing to complain about them. I am more ecumenical. I'm not the enemy as some atheists are, but I do not feel that it is my Church.

I think these two Churches have different understanding of their role in the world. I have the impression that Orthodoxy puts greater emphasis on love. Catholics praise the commandment to "love thy neighbor as thyself" but I have a feeling that this is a bit of a *cliché* that doesn't really fit.

Recently, I have been writing for our magazine about saints including St. Pope John Paul II. I get the impression that Catholics have a problem with the model of sanctity. No one seriously thinks that he or she may be a saint. It seems to be unreal, unreachable. John Paul II is a Saint. It is known that he was good. There are nuns that are saints, for example Faustina Kowalska. She had visions. But that is it. It is not believed that everyone could be a saint.

Orthodoxy puts much greater emphasis on individual contemplation. In this sense, we are closer to the eastern spirituality. The point is that you need to be closer to God, strive to be better, loving, righteous, etc. That is enough. Orthodoxy is not about fulfilling certain conditions, but contemplating and considering what you have done.

Tell me how you see your relationship through the perspective of your faith?

My relationship with my ex-husband was very specific. He only went to church in order not to provoke any discussions. Back then, we decided that our children would be baptized in the Orthodox Church. He was not religiously engaged. He had a problem with speaking about God, even with me. Later on, he changed his mind. He was afraid what his parents would say if their grandchildren were baptized in the Orthodox Church. This marriage did not work out, so we didn't have to go through that.

Now, with my new boyfriend, things are different. We respect each other's religions and feel no need to convert each other. My partner considers himself as half-Orthodox. I can say the same about myself. I am half-Catholic. I used to be a part of it, and perhaps, it is easier for me. Besides, I'm a convert. I know how it is when someone tries to convert you and tells you that you have made bad decisions. We agreed to have 4 children and that two of them will be baptized in the Catholic Church and the other two in the Orthodox Church. I would feel sorry if all of my children were only Catholic and naturally, I would have to go to a Catholic church with them.

Which children would be yours and which would be your partner's? Would you celebrate religious celebrations from both religions?

We thought that the first two would be baptized in the Catholic Church to calm down the family. Nobody from his family, besides my partner's mom, knows that I'm Orthodox. But then I thought that I'm getting older. Different things happen. What if we are going to have only two children? I told him that a second child would be 'mine'.

People solve this difficulty in different ways. I know that in the eastern part of Poland girls are baptized according to the mother's religious denomination, and boys according to their father's. This is also pretty logical since the father raises his sons and the mother raises her daughters. But it is not a popular way of thinking. Some don't baptize their children and leave the choice up to them. But what is the best age to do it? When children are 7-8 years old and go to the First Communion, or when they are already more conscious? And what if a four year old asks for Baptism; what do you tell her/him? No, you have to wait until you're more mature? What if a child did not want to be baptized at all? And besides, I am afraid of the possible rivalry between us, that each of us would try to prove his/her Church is more fun.

Do you think that children can reconcile two confessions?

Yesterday, my partner said he can see it happen. I find it more problematic. I always take part in the ecumenical days. I pray for the unity of Christians. At the beginning, there was one Church.

I think that Protestants in Poland will start the dialogue with the Orthodox sooner than Catholics although the Catholic Church is closer to the Orthodox Church. However, for me, it is still hard to imagine. There are conflicting opinions, for example, about the pope. He is recognized as a bishop who is

separated from the Churches and is expected to return.

The Greek Catholic Church is something in-between. For some Roman Catholics, they are not ‘real’ Catholics. They are also often discriminated and called ‘the worse Catholics from the east’. I think that the external things like the language or the way we make the sign of the cross matter. My friend from the Sub-Carpathian region, whose family is half-Greek Catholic, happens to be a Catholic though she feels connected with the Ukrainian side. She told me that the Greek Catholics no longer have these *czotek*, as Orthodox Christians do, only rosaries. Almost everything is Catholic; the only ‘Orthodox parts’ are the rituals. Still, they are considered to be different.

Let's return to you inner life... and to the main theme of the project if there is a place for me in the Church? Is there a place for you in your new religious community? Do you feel comfortable there?

Well, certainly yes; mainly, because it is a small community. Only 50 people come to celebrate the Liturgy. The whole parish has around 150 members and people know each other, at least by sight. It is like a little home. But in Warsaw, it is not the same. When I visit the community in Warsaw, I feel like a stranger even though we can say that this is my Church.

I feel that I am one hundred percent a part of the Orthodox Church. This may result from the fact that the priest here gives short sermons, tells us what is in the Gospel, and in the Catholic Church, I thought it was boring. For me, the Holy Mass in the Roman rite is too short. I cannot calm down, enter into a different space, and leave everything behind in one hour. According to the Byzantine rite, when you enter a church, it is as if you entered the vestibule of heaven. I feel that the whole world is left somewhere behind. I do not have to think about anything that normally distracts me. My partner also calms down; he cries during almost every Liturgy. When it happened for the first time, I thought something bad had happened. During the Catholic Mass, one does not have that space. You are still in some interaction. They talk to you, you talk back, and you listen to the sermon.

How do you manage to apply the rules of Orthodox morality in everyday life? You cohabitate with your current partner, right?

I do not go to Confession now, but it's really not about sex. That's what I told myself. I could go to a priest and ask what he thinks about it; I would probably do it if I could receive Communion. I know that if we could, we

would marry. That is why I do not have any problem with not being married. I know it is somehow problematic for my partner. Perhaps, in his head, I am still married to my ex-husband. I'm thinking, what if I never get that annulment? I wish my partner had a clean situation because it is clear for me. According to his perspective, he is still with a married woman although according to my belief, that matter is clear. I do not love my ex-husband. But officially, I am still his wife. We got married in the Catholic Church and our marriage must be dissolved there. My conscience is clear.

Are there any things in everyday life that are hard to follow?

They are more associated with the weakness of my own character.

If you have any personal problem, do you address God to help you solve it?

I think so. I always solve problems through the prism of my faith. Currently, I pray for the annulment of my first marriage.

A Couple Talks about Their Reasons for Conversion from the Catholic Church to a Protestant Community

Interview with Bára and Václav, Czech Republic
Interview Held in Czech by Petr Jandejsek
Translated into English by Michaela Jandejská

Key words: divorcee, religious conversion, traditional faith, faith dropout, pretending to being Christian, searcher, marital crises, adultery, Christian support, puzzling doctrines, personal relations with God

First, I would like to ask you how you would describe your faith and relation to the Church in your early years and then during your first marriage?

I was born to Christian parents, Catholics, who raised me in the faith or to be more precise, they took me to church. Both of my brothers left the Church. They traditionally attended services from time to time. I took part in services regularly. I remember that when I was about ten, I promised to God that I would never leave Him and that I wanted to be with Him all of my life. However, it was more about visiting church than about a more personal relationship with God.

When I was twelve or thirteen, I took part in meetings of young Christians. I started to sing in a choir, I took part in various events with them, and felt very well amongst them.

When I was nineteen or nearly twenty, I met my first husband. He was not a Christian at that time. We married in the Church after dating for four years. We experienced usual difficulties at the beginning of our marriage but these were growing. Besides, he spent a lot of time at work and was not at home much. Later, during the first crisis of our marriage, he admitted that he was not in fact a Christian and that he had converted and done a lot of other

things only because he did not want to lose me.

I tried to raise my children in the faith but I felt that my relationship with God was not as good as before. Nonetheless, I considered myself to be a Christian and I still had a relationship with God although it was not as lively as before.

We managed to come to a compromise after the first crisis. However, it lasted for only 2.5 years. My husband started to go out with a friend of mine. Then, I met my current husband and I did not want to go back to my first husband because I did not trust him.

Perhaps, I was not patient enough. It is hard to judge, but I think that there were mistakes on both sides and my former husband had justifiable objections to my behavior. But the way he wanted to solve our problems was not the right one.

I have been a Christian all my life, but at that time, if I had truly believed in God, I would have not done some things and might have not caused a scandal. I understand that there were people who had objections to me and who rebuked me because of all those problems... It was very confusing, difficult and painful, and at least some things could have been done differently.

You mention critiques by some people but were there other people around you at that time who supported you? Were you supported by people from the Church and even by the Church itself?

Certainly, but I am even grateful to the people who criticized me because I know they were right and lots of things could have happened differently.

However, when the first crisis broke out, I found support in the local Catholic chaplain. He listened to me several times and helped me to manage the shock from the near-break-up of my marriage. I even made use of the Christian family counseling on the phone. And I was certainly helped by two of my best friends; we visited one another and they supported me. My mom was helpful as well.

And the second crisis? You and your husband did not succeed in getting over it...

For the most part it was probably me who did not succeed. I was not able

to trust my husband enough to stay with him.

At the time of the break-up of your marriage, did you experience any difficulties relating to your faith or more broadly, to your religious life?

A lot of people are convinced that I met a new partner first and then I changed my faith community. But it happened the other way around.

When the first crisis broke out, my first husband was the most negative about the fact that I was a Christian and he criticized various things concerning life with God and the life of faith. Therefore, I started to seek. I visited several other Christian churches and communities, among them the Church of Christian community (Církev Křesťanská společenství), and found out that my husband, to a certain extent, was right.

I started to seek and think more; I visited the Christian community more frequently. To my surprise, I found out that there were things that I did not understand in the Catholic Church and I just did them without thinking. I saw that I could better identify with many things in the Christian community and I understood these things better.

I am not sure how to say it but I think that God is most interested in the relationship we have with Him. What I started to dislike a bit in the Catholic Church was that it is more about traditions and services. I have never been able to understand dogmas, various ways of worshipping the Saints. There were simply things I did not like or things that I did not understand. And I started to find out that there were convictions I can identify better with. So, when my first marriage broke up, I was halfway away from the Christian community.

My second husband was not brought up in a particular faith, but he visited the Catholic community from time to time as well. He had a very good family friend, a priest. When he started to go to the Christian community with me, he said that he could certainly identify with such a faith better. So we both stayed. Since about 2006, we went to the Catholic church occasionally but we started to visit the assembly of the Christian community on a regular basis. We also took part in one of the small groups. It does not mean that everything was to our liking there but it was better than in the Catholic Church. What some people might not know and might blame us for is that we were baptized there as well.

You said that you had been close to the Christian community even before your first marriage broke up. Did you inquire into the annulment of your marriage within the Catholic Church? Or was it not that important to you?

It wasn't that important to me. I rather asked other people about their opinion on my situation. From most of them, I heard that adultery was a serious reason to end one's marriage and that I was right. I still actually do not know what to think about it. On the other hand, it probably would only cause us pain.

I made no efforts to annul the marriage in the Catholic Church. A new marriage was not only a civil one but a Church one as well. Since the Christian community does not have permission to marry people, we were married by a pastor of the Czech Brethren Church.

You have already answered the question about the religious background of your second husband. And you, Václav, do you consider yourself to be a member of the Christian community or just a supporter?

I consider myself a member. My way to the Lord was specific. But I suppose you can say this about everybody: Ask a few people and you will get a different story. I had not experienced a bigger, or a really big community until I came to the Christian community. Before that, I had sometimes visited services in the context of music since I am a musician.

With me it was, to describe it most accurately, like this: Only God and me, without any community. In some situations, it was only me alone. I felt that I should have been grateful to God for many things. And that even without His interventions I certainly would not have had the life I had.

So, from what happened in my life I understood that I really should be grateful and that I should express my gratitude to Him. For some time, my first wife and I belonged to the Roman Catholic parish. We knew one Catholic priest very well and we visited him occasionally. Therefore, my contact with the Catholic Church went, of course, beyond just taking part in the Mass.

Has your spiritual journey influenced Bára? In what way have you inspired one another in your Christian lives?

I would say that it was vice versa. Bára has influenced me in the most

positive sense. Thanks to her, I started to realize that life in a community makes sense. I consider the Church to be a community, not an institution.

I was a bit shy even though I knew and read something about it. I was not able to imagine how it worked in practice. Gradually, I got the experience that there is a big strength in the life of a community; there are a lot of positive things.

Bára, would you like to add anything? Has your relationship to Václav and your marriage had any significance for you from the spiritual or Christian point of view?

Yes. Now, I experience what it means to have a Christian marriage in the true sense of the word. I know that I have someone at home who I can talk with. We sometimes pray together. We share views on various matters such as having a relationship with God, things connected to the Church, community, and events that take place within the community. I simply know we are on the same wavelength.

How did your family react to the fact that you ended your first marriage, married someone else, and joined another Christian community?

At that time, only my mom was alive. My dad had died 20 years before. It was no doubt very difficult for her. She was not happy; she was disappointed and sad, but at the same time, she understood that it was not easy for me to live with my first husband. I can hardly imagine what I would do if my daughter with two small children came to me and told me she was going to divorce. So, it certainly was not easy for her. She, however, respected me although she had some reservations. She always helped by listening to me; we could talk about my situation freely like mother and daughter.

As regards to joining another Christian community, she did not have much sympathy. She might have thought it was unnecessary. We have not discussed this issue so deeply that I could say something about it. My mom certainly believes in God and I would say it is not an entirely traditional faith. But at the same time, the tradition and the fact that she has lived as a Catholic for eighty years and that she was brought up in this faith plays a major role in her life. So, she did not agree; she considered it weird, incomprehensible. But in the end, she even took part in our Baptism ceremony. And now, she does not talk about it anymore. At the beginning, she had to get used to the fact that we did not go to church but to the assembly, in other words, that we went

somewhere else. But she more or less managed to come to terms with it. It is not a major problem for her now.

You said you worked for Charity – a Church institution. Divorce, second marriage, new religious background – have there been any repercussions for these events at your work? Or is it considered a personal matter?

In general, I mostly meet people who treat me the way they used to; they talk to me as if nothing had happened. At my work, I do not experience any difficulties caused by my divorce, new marriage, or the fact that I am no longer a Catholic. I am certainly a person who is friendly to the Catholic Church and I have a lot of friends among Catholics. It might be regarded as weird but when we have the Mass, organized by Charity, I take part in its preparation.

One person rebuked me but I think it was nothing inappropriate. I did not blame the person for it because I could see that she cared for me and her aim was not to condemn me but to help me. I appreciated that.

However, I think that the people who left the Church for good are in a better position than those who changed the Church. It might have been only my impression and not necessarily true.

You said that you had been rebuked – was it formal or informal?

It was rather informal.

You mentioned that you consider yourself to be a full member of the Christian community. Can you briefly describe what it means?

It seems to me that in the Christian community they put emphasis on having a personal relationship with God and Jesus Christ as well as in having a shared Christian life. The community is not an institution but a family of God's children.

We have a community assembly once a week. Then in the middle of the week we meet in smaller groups. I do not attend these meetings regularly.

We run a club every Monday, which is open to the public. Some evenings are completely without a program. People just come to talk or to read or they can borrow a book. They can come to pray or they can share their troubles. We take turns to prepare the program for some evenings. There are also

programs for children – a club and summer camp.

We have just started our service in the Alzheimer center where my husband and our pastor are involved.

Once a year, we have a community day, which is a great social occasion. It is similar to Catholic parish day. We spend the whole day together; we have a barbeque and we talk. There are also games for children.

Every week, we get an information leaflet from our pastor, which includes ‘the word’ for next Sunday together with a list of needs we can pray for such as the needs of the community as well as of the town, our country, or of the world.

Václav: We organize meetings with interesting people who are either Christians or they lived through some events that led them to God. It is often a testimony of one’s life with God.

The Catholic Church provides some theory and practice of how marriage should look like, how a decent life led in the Church should look like. But you have your own life experience as well as life experience with another Christian community. Taking your experience into account, what would you recommend to the Catholic Church? What should be changed, if anything, in the ways the Church treats people, teaches about marriage and community?

I am not sure whether I know enough about this.

It doesn’t have to just be about theory; we can focus on practice.

I know that the Catholic Church considers marriage to be indissoluble. I believe that all Christian Churches do, at least most of them. It seems to me that in our new community some rules are even stricter.

I am talking about the situation when someone who had divorced and remarried is not allowed to share in the Eucharist and other sacraments. Does something similar happen in the Christian community or is it more open to people?

When marriage is annulled in the Catholic Church and the person marries someone else, are they allowed to receive Communion?

Yes, they are.

I think that since the Christian community recognized we had a serious reason to divorce and to have a new marriage in the Church, we are allowed to take part in the Lord's Supper.

So, the Community has recognized it as agreeable?

Yes.

I do not need to have a dialogue with the Church. Instead, I look for direct contact with God

A Catholic High School and University Student Does Not Have Confidence in the Church

Interview with Viki, Hungary
Interview Held in Hungarian and Translated into English
by Richárd Papp

Key words: catechism classes, Catholic boarding school, Catholic University, 'mandatory' spirituality, the Church as a sect, verbal or physical harassment by clerics, celibate

Would you characterize your family as a religious one? Were you raised Catholic?

My parents were not religious. I saw my father in church only on special occasions. My mom used to go to church when she was young because she was rebellious. It was during the communist era when going to church was not advisable. When the head teacher at school asked: "Has anyone been to church?", she would always proudly raise her hand and say: "Yes, I have." That was her act of protest and rebellion. Later, when going to church lost its kick for her, when it was no longer an act of 'revolt', she did not go to church anymore. My grandma, on the other hand, is religious. She still goes to church. She reads the Bible and other Catholic publications.

My mom said that they had to baptize me because my great grandmother was afraid that I would have remained a pagan if I hadn't received the sacrament immediately.

A priest who taught Sunday school was absolutely a levelheaded guy, and a good friend of my parents. I attended the catechism classes thanks to him and I received my First Communion. I went through preparation for

Confirmation too since everybody else was doing it, and it seemed to be such a kick, so I did it.

My elementary school was not a Catholic school. Still, there were catechism classes. However, the teacher who taught them was not good. We went to class only to make fun of him.

When the time came to choose a high school, my parents and I chose a Premonstratensian high school in another city. I liked that school a lot. The first time I set my foot there on school open house days, I immediately took a liking to it. That is why I wanted to go there.

It was indeed a great school. Except for the catechism and ethics classes, priests did not teach most of the other classes. The dormitory that I lived in was run by the diocese though. We had a prayer gathering every evening. There was no excuse and no way to skip it. On the first Thursday of each month, they held a short retreat for us as well. A different priest held it each time, and we all had to participate. There was a Mass and mandatory Confession. To avoid contact, girls and boys had to stay on the opposite sections of the chapel. The worst part of it was that it was mandatory. That is why everybody ended up hating the whole thing. Some of the students went to church regularly even when they were at home. However, the majority of us usually went to church only on Christmas and Easter.

At school, Mass was celebrated only twice a year, once at the beginning, and once at the end of the school year. Only the dormitory was very strict. Therefore, I only attended the very first Mass during the first year, and the last Mass, which was after graduation. I did not bother with it. I saw no point in it. Once the Mass coincided with the Budapest Parádé, so instead I went there.

During high school, did you embrace any of the Catholic spirituality, or did your resentment prevent you from doing so?

My resentment was stronger. Not even today could I see myself going to church. In those days, I saw the whole Catholic Church as a huge sect. Nothing but phony business and outrageous hypocrisy. Hypocrisy that was prevalent everywhere.

Such was the dorm-life too. For example, the last principal was a bigoted Catholic woman. She hated me because I dared to speak my mind. Whenever there was a competition, or wherever a dorm representative had to be present, it was always me who had to go. I was never free when these events took

place. Once I almost got expelled. The rules were so unfair. The boys could leave the dorm for an hour any time in the evening while the girls could only leave for fifteen minutes. We even had to beg for those fifteen minutes. Well, I just couldn't accept that.

My mom had to bargain with them so that I would not get kicked out. The rule was that if I got expelled from the dorm, then I got expelled from the school too. When I was getting really close to being kicked out, an elderly priest with whom I had a really good relationship would always help me out. More than that, he had a good relationship with the priest who was a friend of my parents. They even discussed that if there was a man willing to marry me, they would wed us. He used to say: "We cannot lose you."

He knew what they served for dinner in the dorm, so he invited us over to his place. He said: "I have some home cooked specialty. Together, let us eat something tasty after all that bland dorm-food." Sometimes, when he invited us, we would be granted permission to leave. They were not happy about it, but they let us go. And we gladly went. We could only go for an hour, but it was still good. He always had *pálinka* from Transylvania, and some wine also, and that was good.

This priest was my catechism class teacher for the first two years of high school. One day, he had to go away for two to three weeks. Therefore, he found another priest, a young guy, around thirty, to replace him. From the very beginning, judging from the way he laughed, we could tell that something was not right about him. This young priest came in as a substitute and came up with the idea that we were going to have random oral exams. This was not customary at all. To be honest, we never learned anything in the catechism class. I was sixteen at the time. He opened the class roster, and it opened at the page with my name on it. I got up and went to the front. I knew nothing about the subject so he could ask anything; I had no answers whatsoever, just as none of my classmates had the answers. This ordeal lasted a good half an hour out of the forty-five minute class session.

However, later on, I had developed a friendship with this young priest. We had a good relationship. We learned that from next year onward he was going to be our teacher. He even moved in to the community next door from our school. We talked and chatted a lot. When we met in the hallway, we giggled. But I never felt anything special towards him. I even visited him in his residence, but nothing ever happened. Others were warning me saying: "He likes you." I thought: "Oh, come on, stop kidding me!" I did not take it seriously. My friends were asking me why he and I hang out. I answered:

“Because he is really cool and I enjoy hanging out with him.”

Then came my best friend’s birthday. It was wintertime and we were in a pub. The priest was with us too. We were drinking, and drinking some more. It got weird since there was about thirty of us, and he always ended up sitting close to me. Then he started nagging me to dance with him. We were sitting next to each other on the bench. I sat the way you normally sit on a bench while the priest sat facing me. He kept asking me to dance with him. Then he asked to go somewhere else. I felt quite uncomfortable and kept saying “no, don’t, don’t, don’t”. But he kept touching me. Seriously, it was totally uncomfortable and sickening. I was lucky that a classmate of mine who just got his driver’s license came. When he realized what was happening he rescued me. He said: “Let’s go; I’ve got a car.” This is how I was able to get away.

So, everybody saw the whole situation. He kept holding my hand and kept asking me to go to dance with him. He said that he would ask for some dance music considering we were in a pub where no one dances. And he talked to me, only to me the whole night, until I managed to escape. I did not go back.

After this, there was a weekend retreat. I was accompanying the freshman class. That priest lived in the same building where the retreat was being held. There was a shower on the same floor, right next to his small room. We had to wait until all of the freshmen took a shower and only after the last couple of people left could we take a shower. This priest waited for a whole hour in the hallway for us to go to the shower. It was disgusting. After that, I never spoke to him again. When he tried to talk to me, I answered: “I don’t have time”, or I just walked away. I changed the way that I responded to him. I was not nice. I did not smile. When he stopped to talk to me, I walked on. I did not speak to him.

From then on, in every class, he held a random oral exam, and he always called on me. He would just come in and say, “Let us have our oral exam.” He would open the class roster and call on me. What could I do? I went up to the front. On the third occasion, I said: “Not again!” Out of defiance, I did not answer him. We had one written exam. By the end of the semester, in his class, I collected nine 1s and one 2. The 2 that I received was for the written exam.¹ I think by then other teachers knew what was going on, because except for math and chemistry, I had top grades. I was only failing the catechism class.

This continued during the next semester. The only difference was that in

the next semester it was not catechism class but ethics class. By then, he did not call on me all the time, but I had to sit in the first row with a classmate of mine, a boy. So, I had to sit up front, because the teacher said, in his class I must sit there, closest to him. He asked for my opinion about everything, just everything. And I continued to be resentful. After all, I did not fail his class.

Once that other priest came and asked why I hardly had anything but 1s. And I told him that this young priest kept calling on me and I got nothing but 1s. The older priest did not want to talk about it anymore. Obviously, he figured out what was going on. However, he spoke up at the teachers' conference at the end of the year saying that it would be 'unrealistic' if I failed this class. That's how I ended up getting a 2.

Did you share this story with anyone?

I did not have to tell those who were at the party. I did not tell the older priest, and I did not say anything at home either. The ones who were at the birthday party knew. My roommates at the dorm knew about it too. So did my classmates. I did not say anything to the teachers because it sucked as it was. I did not know whether it was true or not, but according to the rumor mill, this priest once had a fiancé who left him. This is why he became a priest. And he hit on me because I looked a lot like his ex.

Outside of class, I had no contact with him, and I have not had any contact with him since then. If he would suddenly show up, I don't know what would happen.

How did all of this affect your feelings towards Catholicism?

It did not help. The greatest stupidity of the Church is that priests cannot marry. Nine out of ten have some kind of a relationship anyway. I think that was the basis of this whole thing.

How do you think back on your school years? Did this event alter your opinion about Catholic boarding school?

It did not alter it, as I did not get disillusioned at all. Those weekend retreats were good. It helped the freshmen to bond and it also gave them a chance to get to know the senior class. It was also good to prepare for the holidays, like for Christmas. At Advent, people played the guitar; we did some singing and praying. We had lots of discussions too. Priests led all those and they were good.

The young priest attended these events too. But that did not lessen my positive experiences. I simply did not communicate with him, and that was it. He tried for a while, but then he gave up because he sensed my resentment. In short, I liked the school, and I liked these shared events, but I could not say that it helped my religiosity.

After high school, did you have anything to do with the Catholic Church?

Yes. After high school, I went to a Catholic university. Having something to do with the Church, even only indirectly, had its advantages. The university has a lot of money and I received really good scholarships. I liked that a lot since I could live comfortably due to their financial support. It was not an all too religious institution anyway. They had an opening Mass for the academic year and a closing Mass for the academic year, but other than that, there was nothing. Our student-instructor relationships were different too. It may be because I attended classes at the Department of Humanities and the instructors were nice and supportive. They did not put anyone down. It was almost like having a friendship and I really had a good time there.

How do you feel: Is there or could there be room for you in the Church? Can you see yourself having a closer bond with Catholicism?

Not really. I remember, in school, I had two Protestant classmates. During one of the classes, one of the priests said, somewhat jokingly, but I'm not convinced that he really meant it as a joke: "Well, you Protestants, you'll end up in Hell anyway."

On one hand, they had these slogans "Love thy neighbor!", and "We are all brothers and sisters", and other commandments and teachings. On the other hand, they said that gypsies, gay people, drug addicts, or liberals are bad people. They also said: "How could anyone be a Buddhist, following Buddha's teachings?!" They said stuff like that. And all of these came up during catechism and ethics classes. They said that they are all 'bad' people and they will end up in hell.

We, students, argued about that and I received many bad grades because of that. One teacher called me a 'liberal'. Well, that was all too serious. Also, I had a friend whose head-teacher was a priest. This kid once came up with the idea of getting dreadlocks. He had a really good relationship with his head-teacher so he told him about his idea. The priest said that if he got them done,

he would never want to see him again. And when the kid really got his dreadlocks the priest had him transferred to our class. He did not get expelled, but had to leave his class. With this kind of hairdo, he could not stay in his class.

This is why I cannot relate to the Church. My biggest problem is hypocrisy. I could see even in the dorm that things were not the way they were shown to the outside world. Mandatory prayer and Confession contributed greatly to that. I used to go to Confession; I sat in the confessional because that was the way to do it, and I confessed that I used swear words, and that I failed in my obligations...

We had to go to Confession on the first Thursday of every month. There was a Mass after it. Sometimes it was really good what priests would say during their sermon. It was to benefit our spiritual growth. But I would say that nine out of ten did not come across very well at all. Everyone was preoccupied with something, paying attention to everything else except for what was being said at the pulpit. But on occasion, there were some very nice moments too. But most were mediocre. Also, on Thursday, after Mass, there was this *silentium*. It was supposed to be total silence, not even a faint whisper. Naturally, that is when we turned on the stereo. We had our confrontation with the dorm's principal and staff.

During Confession, I went through the routine, but I really did not care for the whole thing. There was only one occasion when Confession felt really good. It was when the priest who was our family's friend came. I went in and we had a nice chat. Otherwise, Confession meant nothing to me. I went to Confession because I had to.

In short, I cannot relate to the Church because I don't feel Her spirit at all. Then, there is celibacy. What hypocrisy! It is obvious, for example, where I live, that every priest has a woman. A priest got together with one of the English teachers. He left the order, got married, and now, they have children. It's totally outrageous to forbid them from what they are doing anyway.

Translator's Notes:

¹ 1 is failing; 2 is a passing grade.

My life would be empty if I were to turn my back on the Church

Situation of a Woman in a Relationship with a Celibate Priest

Interview with Elisabeth, Romania
Interview Held in Hungarian by Nagy Katalin
Translated into English by Hajnalka Tamas

Key words: partnership with celibate priest, celibacy, employees in the Church

First of all, I would like to ask you to describe in a few words your belonging to the Church, how you are related to Her, and how intense your relationship to the Church is.

My relationship to the Church is quite strong. This already started in my childhood. In my youth, I engaged quite intensively in the activities of our parish: I was singing in the choir; later on, I was leading the choir; I participated in decorating the church and volunteered in all kinds of other parish activities. Since I have completed cantor and organist studies, my relationship to the parish could be described as an employer-employee relationship.

Yet, I could not say whether my religious affiliation can be described as a relation to the Church or a relationship with God. However, I believe that, at least at this moment, I'm a member of the Church.

To what extent did your relation to the Church develop out of your volunteer work as well as, later, your professional career in a Catholic school where you are working now?

Since my relation to the Church became official, my previous enthusiasm, probably, somehow diminished. A volunteer always has more enthusiasm. He

or she always invests a lot of emotions in his or her work. With employment, it is different because there are many things that one doesn't always like to do. However, even those things have to be done because the boss expects it from us.

Since you are leading a double life, you find yourself in a very specific situation. If a secret part of your life would be revealed, you might be fired from your job in a Catholic school regardless of whether you have worked there for almost 20 years. Could you please say something about it and how you are able to endure such burdens?

The fact that I am forced to lead a double life makes my life miserable. I cannot say that it is a pleasant feeling knowing what I would lose if my secret were to be revealed.

This lifestyle slows me down from doing my work properly. It takes too much energy. That is trouble. Fear and anxiety are always part of my thoughts. I always have to be careful. If my double life were to be revealed, regardless of the fact that I am now accepted and praised for my intelligence, good work, trustworthiness, kindness, etc., everybody would immediately turn their backs on me. My whole life would be torn apart.

And also the life of your partner?

Yes.

To what extent can you speak about it openly with your family and community? Are there friends with whom you can talk about those topics openly?

Thank God that there are a few people who know about my relationship. I am not hiding anything from them. I can openly tell them about my feelings, my opinions, and my difficulties. It is great to know that there are people who do not repudiate me because of my life, who encourage me, give me advice, and support me so that I do not lose my strength. It is also good to meet some people who are in a similar situation.

Is there a group of people in a similar situation with whom you can meet regularly and talk openly about those issues?

Yes there is. However, we do not meet regularly. Maybe, once in two or three months, I meet a few people who are in a similar situation. If nothing

else, with them I can be who I am. That really means a lot.

How did you come to be together? I assumed that the Church did not offer such an opportunity?

Actually, our friendship started in the Church. We were fellow employees working for the Church. Although some of them have other jobs and do not work for the Church anymore, our friendship continued. When we realized that we are in the same situation, we opened ourselves up to one another. However, it didn't happen all at once. Even though we knew about each other's situations, it was not easy to speak openly. When you live in constant fear and distrust, it is difficult to open yourself up to others.

Is this distrust related to the fact that revealing insights of your life might endanger your existential means?

Yes. I cannot expect others to keep my secret. If I cannot keep it to myself, then it has no worth.

You are pushed to the margins of the Church. Pope Francis has often used this term. In your opinion, what should the Church do so that your burdens might be lighter?

The first and the most important thing would be to reexamine the issue of celibacy. My personal argument, which I hear quite often from others too, is that the Church should be just and give each person the opportunity to decide for himself or herself what they want.

Here, I am thinking about the Greek Catholic Church. In this Church, it is possible to decide whether you want to live in celibacy or not. I deviate a little bit from the topic, but I have a feeling that, for the Church, celibacy is the only fundamental criteria for someone who might become a priest. Such a policy has many disadvantages. One of them is that through this practice the Church is losing a lot of committed people because those who rather choose family life are intelligent, bright, have good ideas, and know how to communicate with people. Quite frankly, I am still not at all sure that those who are ordained, just because they accepted celibacy, are suitable for the priesthood. In my opinion, such a practice in the Church deteriorates the quality of priests and their ministries: Some of them are incapable of performing their ministries and others could not keep their vows.

In your opinion, is it possible to reconcile family life with the

priestly vocation in the Catholic Church? Could you imagine yourself as a priest's wife and that both of you are working for the Church? Would it enhance the priest's work or would it rather be an obstacle for him?

I think that it would be the best solution for both wives and priests. The wives could help their husband priests in their pastoral work. I meet and talk almost every day with a Greek Catholic priest, his wife, and children. I know that his wife helps him a lot. Of course, she has to be ready to accept such a responsibility. In my case, I would be willing to support and to help my partner. In that case, neither he nor I would lose energy living our double lives. But if it were to be changed, both of us might give more to the Church as well.

Regarding the disciplinary practice of the Church, do you see any other possibilities in how the Church might come closer to the real-life situation of people? I am thinking here of a possible reform of the Church's practice of denying the sacraments to certain groups.

The situation of divorced and remarried people is indeed a big and widespread problem. In my opinion, the cases of divorced and remarried people should be examined individually regardless of what is written on paper: that they are divorced, remarried, etc.

Some of my relatives are divorced and remarried, and others married a divorcee. From their stories, I learned that their first marriage was hopeless. It was perhaps an unfortunate choice, but there was no other solution than a divorce. They go to church regularly, their children are altar boys, and they receive the sacraments – the children, not the parents. Despite the fact that the Church excludes them, they are going to church every Sunday. They should be allowed to receive the sacraments too. We would be very happy if they were allowed to participate more closely in the life of the Church.

In your opinion, what impedes the Church from mercifully approaching these life situations?

In my opinion, the biggest obstacles to a more merciful approach of the Church are two seemingly irreconcilable views, namely, on the one hand, the fear that any novelty or innovation in the Church's moral teaching might have serious effects on the ethical behavior of believers, which the Church would not be able to control. On the other side, there is a fear that certain groups

would not accept any novelty or change and they might break away from the Church. Something like this already happened in the life of the Church. Unity is more important than making the faithful feel at home in the Church.

Do you think that the Church doesn't trust the people's capacity for making the right decisions? Does She fear that believers cannot assume responsibility, and that they can only live Christian values within a precisely defined legal and moral framework?

Yes.

Does the local Church pay attention to those whom She excludes from the sacraments? Does she seek to have a relationship with them?

I don't know much about this issue. I have heard that the Church's relationship with them is limited according to the fact that the children of the 'excluded' are allowed to join the preparation for First Communion or Confirmation. In this way, the parents are included in some Church activities. Perhaps, on that single occasion, when their children will receive the sacrament and if the parish priest is good-willed, he will listen to their Confessions and they can receive Communion. However, I am not aware of whether they would deal with these people in an organized way.

If we take this perspective, these people are still there, in spite of the fact that they are cast out. The Church is so important for them that they don't turn their backs on Her. They behave as beggars. If something drops from the table, be it only once, Confession, the Eucharist, they immediately use it; they receive gratefully that which, let's say, wouldn't be characteristic of people of Western society. In the West, those who would be 'excluded' from the Church would turn their back on the Church immediately. Why is this different in our state? Why do people here want so badly, at any cost, to remain there, to be in the vicinity of the Church?

Perhaps, we behave more traditionally and the Church still has a real power. Nevertheless, I believe that it is better that people are still within the Church. The sad thing is that clerics and the hierarchy do not notice how loyal members of the Church actually are. Despite the fact that they are treated harshly, they are coming every Sunday to church. I find this very sad.

Why don't you turn your back on the Church? Why don't you say, it is enough, I don't need this double life anymore? You are a teacher and you can find a post at any state school. Why don't you say that, if the Church does not want me as I am, with all that concerns me, then She shouldn't want me in any way? What is it that keeps you; why is it worth so much for you?

The fact that my life and my heart would be emptied if I would turn my back on the Church keeps me staying in the Church. When one has been raised religiously since one's childhood, it is difficult to suddenly close an essential part of my life by saying that I don't need the Church anymore. The Eucharist and other rituals are important for me. For me, it is not only a formal need but a real spiritual need as well. I hope that the good Lord will take this into account when He will decide about my fate.

If I understand correctly, you do not connote your relationship as a sin? If somebody were to learn about this, the first reaction would be how sinful is the life that you lead.

I do not think that my relationship is a sin or that my life is sinful. In this relationship, I'm always in the background compared to the Church. When my partner has something to do, to celebrate the Mass, to teach, etc., then I always remain in the background; I draw back and wait. I am very proud that no religion class, nor Holy Mass, nor other parish programs have ever been cancelled because of me. It is very difficult to do this for a long time.

Another aspect is that I feel that my partner opened up to me and trusts me; then the least that I can do is stand up for him and try to somehow help and make it easier for him, be it only by listening to him patiently or giving my opinion on his affairs. Never, in no way do I influence him in his decisions. I just say my opinion.

This is interesting because when it comes to such priest-woman relationships, generally, it is considered that the priest assumes all responsibilities. This comes to the fore. But as you tell me now, I rather understand that the person who assumes a great deal of responsibility in this situation is you, precisely the woman. It means that, in the long run, the woman should assume the greater sacrifice, if it is not a passing adventure, but a commitment. Am I right?

Yes. If I want him to feel well, if I seek his good so that he can carry out

the work for which he assumes responsibility, then I can help him by remaining in the background and waiting. If I can help with something, depending on the possibilities, I'll try to do my best. It is a great weight; it isn't easy for him either, but that's the situation.

From where do you gather strength to carry this weight? Where do you recharge spiritually? We obviously already talked about the importance of human relations, but what about your relationship with God? Tell me a little bit about the spiritual side of your life.

First of all, from prayer, it helps a lot to feel that the Good Lord really loves me in spite of everything. Nobody can take this feeling away from me and I will never lose it. Second, it is the time that I spend with my partner. Each time that I meet him, I renew my decision that it is worth staying with him. Such decisions are not based only on emotions. Emotions are not stable; today, I'm in a better mood, tomorrow, maybe not so much. One needs will and strength to live in such a relationship. A person needs will and strength to remain in a marriage as well. If it is the only possible way for us to be together, let it be.

Thus, absurdly, God can even strengthen a relationship condemned by the Church, and with this knowledge, you two can strengthen your commitment.

Indeed!

For the time being, I do not want to be actively involved in the Church's actions

The (Un)Faith Journey of a Theologian with 'High Potential' Who with Time Turned into 'the Black Sheep'

Essay Written by Camil, Romania
Translated from Romanian into English by the Author

Key words: communist regime, discovering religion, searcher, theological studies, traditional education, conformism, clergy, pastoral work, divorcee, remarried, laicization of priest, taboos

"The World is a book, and those who do not travel only read a page".

(Saint Augustine)

Childhood under the Communist Regime

My God-given journey through this interesting world began 37 years ago in an Eastern European country led by a dictator whose picture, which had the caption: "The Almighty Leader", was hanging in every kindergarten and school.

My childhood in such a country, which lacked the basic resources to fulfill the daily needs of its population, is still very present in my memories. Regarding my 'connection' with religion: Faith and its institutional form represented by the Church was quite non-existent in my life during the communist period. The only memory that I have in this respect is attending the Easter Mass at the age of 10 in an Orthodox parish. The reason for that was that my parents weren't practicing any form of religion either.

My mother was the daughter of a female secretary of the communist party

at a neighborhood level, whereas my father's father was convicted and imprisoned for his political views, and his mother came from a so-called 'family with unhealthy roots'. This was an expression used by communists to refer to people who were entrepreneurs, land owners, and those who had more than one property in their possession.

Fall of the Iron Curtain and the First Real Contact with Religion

After the fall of the Iron Curtain and the communist regime in Romania, a new term was often mentioned in my family, namely the Greek Catholic Church. In 1990, I started noticing that my father would disappear every Sunday morning. Curiosity, which is a God-given trait, took the upper hand in me and I asked my father what was so interesting that kept him busy every Sunday for 3 hours. I received the first answer to my question when my dad took me to an 'open-air church'. The Greek Catholic Church used to hold its Sunday Mass in a big public square regardless of the weather, be it sun, rain, storm, snow, drizzle, or freezing temperatures. A group of future young priests set up the altar and elderly respectable priests, who had spent many years in communist prisons, celebrated Mass.

My 'first journey' was taken to the next level by my father who took me to catechism lessons when I was 14. I attended them in order to prepare for my First Communion. The preparations took 2 years and finally in the summer, my big day came. It is still a very vivid memory in my mind, the feeling that I was actively taking part in the 'reconstruction' of the Greek Catholic Church. However, my 'activity' didn't last for too long as I entered the age of adolescence and other topics and areas took over my mind. So, faith and the Church changed into a vague presence in my life.

Reconnection with the Church and Admission to Faculty

I 'reconnected' with the Church only after finishing high school, when I was preparing myself for university. I wasn't successful in my first university application so I had to wait for a year to be admitted during the next admission process. As I was waiting, my grandmother, the former communist party secretary, suggested that I should study Theology since my great grandfather was a reformed bishop and there was a dean in my father's family. It wasn't anything too special to impress me, but I decided to follow her idea anyway and I applied and was accepted into the Faculty of Greek Catholic Theology.

I discovered that there was a kind of 'clan domination' formed by old and middle aged priests running the Faculty and their families. The education methods involved old-fashioned theological literature studies, some very vague debates on 'hot theological topics', and the constant invigilation of students' personal lives. Those who didn't attend weekly Masses were considered to be 'black sheep', also the ones who went to clubs and pubs, but above all, the ones who lived with their partners in university dormitories. The university was a lay institution so it had no links with the Church. These people were permanently expelled from the Faculty in an instant. This created an atmosphere of constant suspicion among students. Those who were obedient were highly regarded by the Faculty Board. However, very often, there was no correspondence between student knowledge, good marks, and obedient behavior. What was most appreciated was the 'obedient behavior'.

Personally, I managed to find my way around this by getting high marks and developing my spiritual life under the supervision of a 'nonconformist' priest who did not belong to the 'club of the beloved ones'.

As every reign has its fall and end, also the ruling domination of the Faculty abruptly ended. Things somehow relaxed, friendships started to grow naturally and sincerely among students. I was continuously evolving in learning and practicing Theology. Reading theological as well as secular literature, combined with a practiced faith in the form of daily attending the Holy Mass in the early hours of the day and making my voice heard at the Faculty Board as the students' representative slowly made me a 'prominent student' in the eyes of the local bishop, priests, and faculty professors. Still, my courage and ability to challenge and tackle different 'uncomfortable topics' for the Church was missing.

Wish to Serve the Church as a Priest by Studying Abroad

With time, the wish to be more active in the Church transformed itself into a wish to become 'a servant of God and people'. Graduation came and my plan to become a priest was closer to fulfilment. I enrolled myself in the seminary for priests where, up to that point, I was highly regarded for my mature thinking and somehow obedient behavior. My courage and ability to challenge and tackle different 'uncomfortable' topics for the Church was showing its first seeds, although the environment wasn't suited for such development. Still, I was highly appreciated by the local bishop.

My intellect was asking for more so I looked for learning possibilities outside my country, and moreover, outside the usual environment offered to

priest candidates, namely ‘mother Rome’ or obscure faculties in France. The German speaking countries were the perfect choice, which suited my expectations, so I got a PhD scholarship in one. The local bishop was not that happy, but I still received his approval.

What happened in the next four years of my studies abroad could be described as a bitter-sweet cocktail. On the one hand, I faced new challenges in the learning environment; I encountered a highly skilled academic staff and came across lots of opportunities for self-development. On the other hand, the conditions of my home country and especially the Church were getting to me.

During my studies, I took part in lots of seminars and conferences on various topics such as the sociology of religion, ethics, and economics in order to build up my expertise and to be prepared to actively take part in the life of my Church once I was back in my home country. These were my expectations; however, the people back home were not prepared for the type of theology that asks questions and constructively challenges minds and ways of thinking. Signs were coming also from the local bishop who was reluctant to accept the academic environment in which I was developing myself, stating many times that “the theology that you are studying is too liberal and protestant”, without bringing any arguments to sustain such an assumption and without asking once about my PhD topic.

With time, my wish to become a priest somehow diminished, but at the same time, my wish to teach at the Faculty of Theology at which I studied remained vivid.

Return and Downturn Home

So far, so good! My PhD thesis was finalized and successfully defended. My next step was to return to my country in order to offer my knowledge and expertise. Although not convinced that this was a good decision, I decided to be ordained as a married priest.

There was no clear sign of interest from the Faculty of Theology to employ me or at least to use my knowledge gained through my years of studying abroad in the field instead of keeping someone who had no qualifications for the position. This subject is considered fundamental for the theological curricula.

I made them an offer of teaching for free for one semester and afterwards, perhaps, we could discuss cooperation in the form of me being an associate

lecturer. What is important to mention is the fact that the Faculty Board encouraged me to study abroad, and then return home to cover the fundamental theological domain. My offer of being at least an associate lecturer didn't get any acceptance because of 'financial reasons', which on the one hand was a fair point. The local Greek Catholic Faculty had limited financial resources so this was a good and plausible excuse.

In the meantime, I took my role as vicar in a suburban parish. The parishioners were used to my style of preaching and behaving, but gradually the dean of the parish started asking me to preach about the coming of the Lord and the Apocalypse, because "you have to keep the people in constant fear and under control. Challenging and questioning doesn't help people in their redemption".

Unfortunately, my personal life hit rock bottom so separation was inevitable. 'Inevitable' is just a soft word, but the reality behind it was much harsher, especially being ordained a priest. I took the necessary steps, namely informed my bishop, the vicar responsible for priests in the diocese, and the dean of the parish that I had separated from my wife and I intended to leave the priesthood. The news spread within a few months with the help of 'churchly trained gossipers', and went viral like a YouTube video, although I had shared it only with the above-mentioned persons and I kept a low profile.

Interesting Reactions Worth Mentioning

1. The local bishop had only one discussion with me in which I explained to him the reasons for my decision. During the so-called discussion, he only took notes. At the end, he reminded me of the consequences of such a decision, offered me a printed image of Holy Mary, shook my hand, and that was all.

2. The vicar responsible for priests in the diocese had three meetings with me at different times. At the first meeting, he told me that I had provoked a real scandal in the Church, and from now on, I was going to be regarded as undesirable and I wouldn't be able to accommodate myself in society as a layman. Somehow, he showed some compassion for my personal situation. At our second and third meetings, he handed me the second written warning from the bishop and asked me to repent for the sins I had committed and to return to my ministry.

3. The dean of the parish clearly stated: "You will be an outcast, a loser. You will be excommunicated from the Church and without the Church you

are nothing.”

From time to time, I received calls from priests who wanted to confirm the gossip they had heard about me. They wanted nothing more than a confirmation, no intention to help or talk, or to hear my version of the story.

Another difficult step was my written request addressed to the local bishop to be given a lay status. After requesting this, judicial steps were taken by the bishop in the form of three written warnings. As already mentioned, he hadn't had any other discussions with me. Finally, after two years, my request to be laicized was approved.

Is Life Possible after Leaving the Priesthood?

After leaving the priesthood, I had to start putting broken pieces of my life back together. I got divorced and then remarried, but only in a registrar's office.

In my experience of building up my life again, I had mixed feelings. On the one hand, I had to face the reality of the unknown divorced life. It was something that had never happened in my family before. On the other hand, I was aware and I still am that a piece of paper, which formally ‘sets me free’ from the duty of being a priest, does not stop me from practicing my baptismal priesthood and can't change the fact that I am ‘sealed’ with Jesus’ priesthood forever.

My Place in the Church vs. ‘Taboo’ Topics in the Church

Being a Catholic, I was and I am fully aware of the consequences of getting divorced and remarried. I am not alone in this situation and I know that in this world there are also many priests who have left the priesthood and probably others who have experienced even worse situations and their consequences.

I also know that there are cases of priests who lead a double life, either being celibate or married or still not being content with their life. My message to them is to stop leading such a life thus making their life miserable and the lives of others miserable as well. Life is much more than this! I am also aware that many of them are not skilled or prepared to assume the role of a simple layman. For many of them, priesthood only means a safe haven, being financially secure, with no competition, but also with their hearts slowly turning into stones. Be sincere with yourself and start taking life into your own hands! God is a constant presence in our lives!

I have to admit that my (re)integration in society was possible thanks to my own efforts and especially due to the fact that during my time of studying abroad I broadened my learning areas and perfected my foreign language skills. My theological and spiritual experiences helped me a lot in dealing with people and the situations, which I have to manage now in a competitive environment. I am grateful for all the years that I had spent being 'a part of the Church system', with some pleasant but also some 'stormy' times. I found my way in the society!

Regarding my current relation with the institution of the Church, and especially with the local Church, I am only a Sunday churchgoer. I do my best to educate my child in the spirit of Christian values and of being truly human. From time to time, I have contact with priests, but nothing more. Unfortunately, the direction of the local bishop with respect to educating priests hasn't changed: "We want humble priests, and not educated ones!"

For the time being, I do not want to be actively involved in the Church's actions. I am just an observer, trying to nurture my soul with discernment with respect to the good things that Christian spirituality can offer me.

Every Sunday as well as on other occasions I experience the difficult consequences of being divorced, namely being banned from Confession and Communion.

I had a discussion with one priest about the chances of having access to the sacraments under his guidance, but still, the topic of divorced and remarried believers is taboo in my country.

I have asked myself this question many times: Is it better to ban people from receiving the holy sacraments because of being remarried, or is it better to guide them with discretion with the possibility of at least offering the Eucharist at Christmas, Easter, and other celebrations to them? Access to the sacraments under such circumstances could help to carry 'the cross' of one's decisions.

Not tackling such topics, sweeping them under the rug, and considering them to be taboo doesn't mean that they don't exist.

The Church does not need me! She needs only 'specimens of success' to justify Herself

Between Love and Law – Life Decision of a Priest

Essay Written by Peter, Romania
Translated from Hungarian into English
by Alexandru Szabo

Key words: traditional values, vocation, identity crises, priest power, seminarian crises, conversations with God, ex-priest, Benedict XVI, resentment with the Church leadership

I returned from Rome with great enthusiasm and with diplomas from the Gregorian and Lateran Universities in my bag. I was a priest in a large city. I walked into my room like a man who had achieved something. Suddenly, a strange cold thought ran through my head: This was the last stage of my life before the grave.

My Childhood

I knew my parents as strangers who, for some very good reasons, entrusted my sister and me to our grandparents who lived in the countryside. This was where we grew up with our grandparents in a harmonious relation of love and respect. As kids, we participated in the cultivation of the land, livestock breeding, and chores. I frequently spent time with my grandfather mowing the lawn. Then we talked a lot about the people that lived in the village, those who died in the village, and about his Second World War experiences. I really enjoyed it. My grandparents taught me not to be afraid of life. Actually, they were like my parents.

Our family was known for being religious and I grew up next to a Franciscan church. Surely, it was impressive to hear of heroic priests who dared to struggle with the communist system and those that even died because of this.

I wanted to become a football player and I desired this more than anything else, but ultimately, assessing the opportunities, at the age of 14, I took the admission exam for the seminary.

I would like to note that a potential early exit from the seminary was considered by most of the Transylvanian Catholics, without any exaggeration, a scandalous behavior, comparable with apostasy. Therefore, the direction of my life appeared to have been decided. From there to Theology, a year of practice, and finally, I ended up abroad, preparing for the priesthood.

The Church and Childhood

The Church of my childhood offered the guarantee that life does not end with death, and there is happiness and there is Good. We are not on our own; someone takes care of us. I believed that there is the Good that encourages people to love, and it also helps me to hold on to my identity as a Hungarian, that I am accepted the way I am.

Anyway, the Church was a heroic institution for me, and we were not allowed to disagree with Her. The priests had great power, real power! If they condemned anyone or anything, people would begin to condemn them too. If they did well, they were surrounded by glory and their power over the people was increasing.

First Contact with God

My first godly experience was at the age of 18. For a long time, I was afraid to call this a 'godly' experience because only the Saints could experience such things. On a three-day retreat, I had to make a decision about my life: Clergy or what else? It was an evening. I was walking on the walls of a medieval castle and I suddenly started to talk with the Lord loudly. For hours.

Not far from me, there were the city lights that looked like candles of intimacy and the sparkling spring sky was like a ceremonial hood that was covering my soul. There was God! Yes, He was there the whole time! I knew it; I felt it. My belief in God became completely different. From that moment, I knew that we cannot leave each other ever again.

A fantastic period in Theology followed. I happily and enthusiastically proceeded through the first year.

Crises, Developments

However, my second year was ‘shaded’ by a real identity crisis. I started to fall in love with everybody; I was struggling in my loneliness because of the girls and because of my low self-esteem. I remember an absurd situation when leaving a church; I bumped into an unknown girl. For a few minutes, we could not take our eyes off each other. I couldn’t control my feelings for weeks while I felt worthless, talentless, and generally, powerless. It is terrible when you cannot see anything positive or valuable about yourself. It would have meant nothing to speak to the spiritual leader of more than 100 seminarians; he would not have had a clue about my condition, not to mention that he would not have found anything comforting or a pertinent ‘anecdote’ in the *Presbiterorum Ordinis*, which he mentioned so much.

This period did not solve itself; it just passed. Only God knows how. Lesson learned: Sometimes, God saves some people and leaves others to perish. I cannot really explain in a convincing way why my journey towards the priesthood continued.

After a trimester, the practical year followed. After the first half in a very well-functioning parish, it was proved to me that I had all the talents necessary to be a really good priest. I was able to be enthusiastic, spiritual, witty, active, and popular. During the second half of the year, I volunteered in a nursing home; I washed the elderly, fed them, and amused them. Yes, I would have been a good priest, but I was not prepared for this, since at both places, eventually, I had girlfriends. Therefore, I asked for a year to think about it and I spent it abroad, in a spiritual community. Here, I started my life’s second and last embarrassing period, which traumatized me too much.

In one sentence, I could say that I realized that the most important thing in life is to love, and I did not love. Everything I did came from selfishness. I prayed because I wanted to achieve something; I observed the Ten Commandments to avoid going to hell. I loved my fellow human beings and served them either out of fear of hell and the feeling of guilt, or simply because it was unpleasant, thereby, not enjoyable. Obviously, I could not say ‘no’ to God, just ‘yes’ because, otherwise, obviously, it would have meant the end of my happiness in heaven, and so on. Therefore, I wanted to enjoy myself in this life and in the afterlife too, and this consequently led me to these good deeds. I did not see a way out of this, so I became sad.

Once, I told God: “Okay, you have half a year to get me out of this situation. I can bear everything; I can do anything you ask; I can go to

extremes, but if you do not change me in half a year it is your fault, and then I will live my life and will do what I want. I do not care about You anymore.”

Three months passed and suddenly, I noticed that something had changed; I am not sad, the days are lighter, my soul is liberated, and little miracles started to happen around me more and more often. Every day, I was moved by God’s wonderful providence. I wrote more than sixty stories in which connections were explained only by God’s providence and love. This was a very tangible presence.

From then on, with different intensities, I experienced God’s presence through very concrete things.

Studies

I told the bishop about the last years’ experience and I asked for one more year to deepen my faith. He gladly consented and then we talked about the circumstances and continuation of my theological studies in Rome.

Then I graduated from the Lateran University and completed two years of the Licentiate in Theology at the Gregorian University. These were fantastic years. I wanted to learn and never had enough time for it. I wanted to know more and more. I was impressed by everything that I read or heard. There were some really good topics on human behavior and belief that I wanted to explore more in-depth.

Ordination

Years went by and deep inside I felt that it was time for priestly ordination; after all, I was twenty-eight years old. I was not cheerful, I did not grieve, I was not nervous, and I was not afraid. I actually did not feel anything special either before or after the ordination, just what had to come had to come, in a completely normal manner.

Priesthood

I served five years in two major cities. Spirituality, which was a key part of my life, had made a great impact on my witnessing. Thus, in my ministry, I talked a lot about God’s presence in my life; I spoke about specific things from my daily life. An important part of my life was my pastoral work for the university. I was involved in various parish groups; I organized retreats and lectures, preparations for the camps, etc. I really loved what I did, I was gladly doing it, and I was doing what I was fit for. I say, aware of my imperfection: I was one of the best. I had no reasons to complain because I got the

recognition for my work. I was invited several times to run retreats for young priests, and finally, I was appointed the urban parish priest and diocesan director for youth, one week prior to my resignation.

My Resignation

When I was at the seminary, a girlfriend of mine asked me how I could survive alone, without a family and a woman. I said: “As God has helped me in specific situations and preserved me, I expect that He will continue to do so. I do not know what will happen five years from now, but I know that now I have to do this; I cannot do anything else.” I have always thought so. “Do not worry about tomorrow. (...) Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (Mt 6:34)

In the last two years of my ministry, I was struggling and I felt more strongly that the work that I was doing in the Church did not completely correspond with whom I really was. I expected the people to have confidence in me, believe in what I said, and rightly so. For a while you can do anything without being honest, but I could not show anything else than what I actually was, than what honestly belonged to me. But in the loving Church one can openly talk about himself only as long as he follows all the laws. I felt that I was not fit to do it anymore. I resigned from my ministry, from my previous ‘life’ out of love, for love.

Scandal

What is a scandal? A desire to murder spiritually a perpetrator of moral norms and discipline.

“Did you hear?”

“Really?”

The life of the victim is shaped by the gossip from rumors. The gossip goes home and lives his life happily. He does not think any more about the victim whose life he might be crushing by pushing them into a lonely corner or making them resort to alcohol.

Is there a Place for Me Today in the Church?

It is very important to say that after my resignation I never said a bad word, nor did I think anything bad, no matter what others might say. I have never held a grudge against the Church for anything. But at the same time, something changed and my naive eyes had opened.

I would like to bring up 2 examples to convey this point:

a) Canons

When the conclave elected Pope Benedict XVI, he was quite clearly aware of the job description even if it was not written down. This job description had not included at all the possibility that, not even the assumption, the pope would resign from his role. And yet, Pope Benedict XVI resigned from the papacy for personal reasons. For the first time in history! A great topic for gossip. Catholic priests and believers gathered in hundreds of thousands, they mourned, expressed their love, showed regret... I think that it was absolutely the right decision anyway!

Parallel: A priest is ordained. The job description does not include the possibility of leaving his ministry. They resign for personal reasons. Scandal! The Church, priests, and parishioners spread rumors; they remove him, stigmatize him. He is an idol of sin; they do not give him any opportunity to work in other Church institutions. Why is there a difference? That is because there is still validity of the old order: The legislature is always above the law. The boss of the Church is a real boss. Whatever the pope does, it is always right.

That was also when God's laws were created: Moses received the Ten Commandments (Ex 20). God did not explain them to him; Moses simply wrote them down with his hands (Ex 31:18). "You shall not kill", one of them said. Moses went down from the mountain and saw that people worshipped the calf and decided that it was not his brother Aaron to blame, but the people who did not even know that they had sinned against the first commandment. Then Moses said: "Those that are by my side need to kill their brother, friend, and relatives too! The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded them. That day, about twenty-three thousand people died." (Ex 32:27-29) God said thou shall not kill!

b) The System of Belief

Before the conclave, I was reading a lot about how the media was exploring the next pope's profile: "He has to be young and strong if the predecessor has resigned because of his age. He must solve the ethical issues of religion in many pedophilia scandals, the Vatican bank, the consecration of women, etc." I thought about it. It is terrible, frightening that the role of the pope, who is the Vicar of Christ, is nothing more than a reaction to these situations.

Well, should the pope not be another Jesus here on earth? Should he not be the first example of what a believer could become if you follow the Church and Her teachings of Jesus? What did Jesus say? “In the truth I tell you, whoever believes in me will perform the same works as I do myself, and will perform even greater works, because I am going to the Father.” (Jn 14:12)

If even the pope cannot behave like Jesus, if even the pope cannot be better than others, then the institution he leads is not different from any other humanly founded institutions, which represent ideological systems that meant well but only some of them ‘incidentally’ had succeeded.

A long time ago, I was a better militant of defending the Church but I have become much more demanding and I expect much more from the Church than in the past. The Church should be a miracle; She should be all about happiness and ‘angels’ on earth. But today’s institution is unable to deliver it.

c) Charity

As far as I can remember, I was always helping and defending the Church. Without any exaggeration, I would have given my life for Her anytime. Between the age of 14 and 33, I hardly ever missed daily Mass. I never got bored of it! I resigned from my ministry as a priest and suddenly, I was no longer beneficial for it! As long as I served the Church and I completely lived for the Church, She loved me; as I no longer serve Her from the altar, I do not mean anything to Her! I believed in selfless love. Do I still believe? Not at all! The Church also acts on the give-and-take principle! Therefore, She operates on the same principles as political powers. Therefore, you do not get anything for free, no service. If you are paying for sanctity too, what do you want?

I was naive, extremely naive. I realized that money rules the lives of many priests and it is awful. The priests do not admit it and, moreover, they hide it from others. There are plenty of priests who got rich from the State’s aid and from the help of the West.

The Church taught Her members mainly how to explain everything. She was so involved in explanations that She did not see that the concept of love was not there anymore and it had become irrelevant. And if this is true, and so it seems, what has it got to do with Jesus today, because love was the only thing that He commanded? In contrast, the Church has released thousands of canons interpreting Her actions eventually as being an act of love. Of course, there are and will be as I was, people who bear witness throughout their whole life.

d) Brainwashing

I did not think that this could be true. When you are directly involved in something, said my spiritual leaders, you should not make important decisions about it because you are not objective. Now that I am looking at it from the outside, I am more and more independent. Thank God.

As a child, I learned about the principles of the Church, which were believed in by everyone around me. So how could I not believe in them? In fact, they inspired me to explore and to look to my personal experience, which could demonstrate and validate these principles. In this way, I think that you become authentic in your belief. I got to that point that I had to really consider what I was asking God for, as He actually did fulfill my requests!

How could an enthusiastic and naive priest like myself question the things that he is told? I didn't. And even if one realizes that something is not right, they call it 'temptation' and reject their thoughts, for fear of becoming unemployed. And who would deliberately cut off the hand that feeds them? Perhaps we would expect priests to say: "From tomorrow on, nice faithful people, everything is free: Mass, weddings, funerals - all free of charge. We want nothing for our work." Or we might want to hear a bishop say: "I resign from my high profile job because a large part of my day I spend going through documents, dealing with money and the politics." Not a chance. Unfortunately, there is not enough of a strong spirituality in the Church, which could lift Her senior members above the world of finance, fame, and power. So, what can you expect from the 'little ones' then?

f) What Do I Expect?

A believer is someone who broadly accepts the principles of the Church. A priest is someone who accepts everything. A bishop is someone who identifies completely with the Church. A cardinal is identified as a wise careerist. My soul cries when I think that the pope is not another person like Jesus who heals, makes miracles happen, whose presence charms. When our top people, the bishops, are not transformed because of Christianity, they remain inadequate. Therefore, people do not know what the real differences between the Churches are. There is no living example; all we do is praise the dead! We should look with a magnifying glass at the wonders of the popes and Church leaders after their death, not in their lives.

I dream of a community where there are no rules, just love. Where we do not discuss and criticize our neighbor's behavior and thinking. Where there is

reciprocal help and in result, maybe, a spiritual transformation. Where the more mature ones impress the less mature ones by being examples and provide the appropriate atmosphere for elevation that they can tolerate and accept any possible problems from the less mature ones.

The Church does not need me! That is for sure. She needs only ‘specimens of success’ to justify Herself. Anyone who fails to comply, who is not a devoted follower, taxpayer, supporter, could be a problem. When people of my ‘problematic’ kind are actively present, the priests’ frustration is brighter than the sun. This is manifested in various ways. Today, the Church cannot exclude me, so to speak, but there are other types of methods for removal.

Therefore, I do not need the Church! I do not mind at all the steps that I took many years ago, and it does not matter in which direction my life goes; I am more and more pleased that I became honest with myself and with my God.

I resigned from the priesthood, but I never left the Church

A Former Priest Speaks about His Previous Life as a Priest and How He Got His Life Back on Track after Leaving Priesthood

Interview with Joseph, Hungary
Interview Held in Hungarian and Translated into English
by Andrea Hlavati

Key words: vocation, pastoral work, double life, birth of child, suspended priest, relation with priest's former colleagues

How did you become a priest?

Ever since I can remember, I wanted to be a musician. My father was a musician also and this gave me inspiration. I started studying music during second grade of primary school. After that, I went to a high school where we had music lessons every day. Technically, music filled my life and made my life complete at that time. After high school, I went to a college of music for one year.

The next year, especially the summer break was really interesting for me because I worked at the open-air theatre as an orchestral support person. I was there for the rehearsals from the beginning to the end; we had to be there before the rehearsal and we left later than others did and that time changed something in me. I realized that music was not everything. I saw that I couldn't always play music, that the rehearsals and the plays were great, but the time before and after playing, the time without music needed to be filled with something else.

By that time, I was already in touch with a religious youth group and it impressed me how they read the Scriptures, how they prayed in a totally personal relationship with Jesus, and I really liked that. I was really at the

beginning of my relationship with the Church at that time, but I realized that the relationship with Jesus and teaching of the Holy Scriptures could fill my whole life.

As a youngster, I felt that it was worth setting for myself a big goal and then this helped me realize that teaching the Gospel meant a lot not just for me, but it could be a big invitation for everyone. However, you need great knowledge; you have to know the Scriptures well and the topics relating to God's Word. So, that's how I decided to dedicate myself to this.

So you didn't have any encouragement from your family?

Well, I received a religious upbringing from my family as we went to church every Sunday, I made my First Communion, I received Confirmation, and so, in this sense, I can say I come from a religious family. But they didn't expect or want me to become a priest.

And how did your family react to your decision?

They weren't really happy and they felt that it wasn't a conscious decision until I started the fourth or fifth year of theological studies. Until then, they thought it was just a short-lived idea. But these four or five years proved that the feeling didn't pass so easily, and after that, they supported and helped me.

When and how did you meet your wife?

When we first met, I was a priest here in the city where we are now and she, as a member of a religious family, sometimes came to the church. But at that time, nothing happened between us. So, until I was here, our relationship didn't evolve. There were some times when we met by the church, for example in the 1990's, when many refugees came from Romania and they needed medicine. She worked as a nurse then so she helped to get the medications. Later, there was a pilgrimage to Rome; we were there together and we had an approximately 30-minute talk.

When I was sent to another city by the bishop, she also worked there and not really often, but sometimes, we met each other. Later, these meetings were arranged and regular, but for a long time, we didn't really know what kind of an emotional relationship we had between us; it was just good to be together. I can say that this relationship evolved very slowly and gradually.

What was the main thing that helped you to decide between the priesthood and your family?

Well, the first thing that made me think was our son's birth two years ago. He had a really difficult start of his life. He was kept in an incubator for two weeks because he had problems with his lungs and other medical problems. It hit me that these little lives were so fragile and I realized how much more care they needed. At that time, I was still a priest but I saw that this little child needed much more time and energy, and because his little life started this hard, he needed my help even more so. Then the strain just increased in me.

My son was born in September and I got really sick in October. I was unconscious, and I had extremely high blood pressure, so I had to go to the clinic. I understood that my body was telling me that I couldn't carry on living a double life any more.

The third thing was the answer from Pope Benedict XVI to a question about what should happen to those priests who have relationships with women. He said that it needed to be investigated on an individual basis, but generally, if relationships were leading to marriage, the people in question should leave the priesthood. They should get married because apparently this also is in the interest of the child or children.

This was totally new to me because we knew Pope Benedict XVI as someone pretty strict and not too flexible, so this really made me think. Hence, these three things were the aspects that led to the decision to leave the priesthood – a few months later, of course.

What is your current status in the Church?

In the Church, now, I'm a suspended priest or a priest, I don't know exactly. Obviously, I am suspended in the sense that I am not allowed to receive any of the sacraments; I can't get married in the Church and I can't assume any role within the parish and of course, no other appointment in the Church.

So this is a transitional status, neither ecclesiastic nor secular?

Exactly, this is a transitional status. I submitted an application a year ago via the bishop to the pope to be given a lay status to enable me to get married in the Church, so hopefully, I will be able to establish my status in the Church. This is still in progress.

How difficult is this? What are your experiences?

Well, I knew that the mills of God grind slowly, but the Vatican's maybe

even more slowly, so I don't expect an answer for at least a year.

So you haven't received an answer to this application yet?

No, not yet. Maybe, I will hear something in October.

What are people's attitudes towards you?

We have a nice big family, a lot of cousins and other relatives. The marriage was a big surprise for them. Since I had a really good reputation as a priest it surprised everyone. One of my cousins saw me with my girlfriend (at that time we were not married) and with our son but it was really awkward for them and they didn't know how to ask about it. Only when I told them about my decision did they say that he had seen us so they guessed what was going on.

By the way, they took my side and supported us. They came to the wedding and still, if we ask for help or anything they care about us and are here for us.

As far as the town is concerned, well, I was here for almost two years as a priest, but it was twenty years ago. I came to the congregation in a very difficult moment; there were large tensions between people, the community was divided, and I tried to be a peacemaker here. I could reconcile a lot of people, and this gave me a good reputation, I can say. This reputation helps me, well to be precise, us, to be accepted. We go to church regularly, we have a close relationship with some people, sometimes we talk, they say hello of course, so I think I can say that they have accepted me.

What about the local priest? What does he think about all this?

Before I went to church here as a layman, I had asked for his opinion about this situation. He said that it was up to me and I could go to church whenever I wanted. So my family and I went to church that weekend. We confirmed our membership to the Church and we paid the contribution. Since we made our commitments, i.e. we paid the Church tax, we are considered normal Church members.

What did you experience when you resigned from the Church?

I would like to correct something: What you said is not really accurate. I resigned from the priesthood. I still strongly believe that I am a member of the Church.

There were several different opinions about my decision, mostly from clerics. One of them criticized me and the rest felt sorry for me. But these are not the worst. Some people said that I was a traitor and some of them were praying for my salvation.

All in all, there were many different opinions about this. Interestingly, the local people's attitudes towards this situation were quite positive.

How do you handle this situation as a lay person?

I stopped living a double life. However, I am still somehow experiencing it anyway. I still strongly believe that pastoral work is really important. I was delivering it with great enthusiasm but after a while, it wasn't enough.

In the parish where I was working, someone else had been appointed to my position, so they didn't really miss me. However, where I am now, there is no one else here for this position. I feel that I am really necessary here. I have a lot of things to do. I have to take care of my family and look after the children.

Of course, once in a while, I think about the old times; after all, I had been a priest for 34 years. There were many nice moments during this period of my life. However, my family life is now my new reality. It is said that these moments are irreplaceable.

The problems that can occur every day, there aren't many fortunately, are the basic problems of everyday life. What is really wonderful is that I can experience a lot of things as a simple person, things that are related to our everyday lives.

My wife is a wonderful person who always stands by me. The children are very happy if we spend time together. We play or do homework or anything. So I can definitely say that these things are irreplaceable. It's been a year since we got married and this is so significant in my life.

Was it difficult to find yourself in the world?

On the one hand, it wasn't difficult because my family has always been with me and they stand by me. After I had experienced this normal life as a layperson, I understood how important my strong relationships with my wife, the children, my aunt, uncle, and other family members are. Family forms a kind of protection for us.

The really difficult thing for me was to find a job. I was really surprised

when I went to the local job center and found out that while I was a priest I wasn't entitled to get any unemployment support. The reason for this was that the Church does not pay any insurance for priests. They do not pay sick allowance or unemployment benefits either, only healthcare. So I have to say that the first few months were very challenging. After a while, I was able to find a job because my family helped me. Then I went on paternity leave and I am still on it at the moment. Unfortunately, it will be over soon and I have to start looking for a job again but I am not worried because my family will help me for sure.

Did you get any support from other priests?

No, I didn't. Some of my previous colleagues called me on the phone but I haven't received any official help so far.

What kind of relationship do you have with your ex-colleagues?

Well, I have some relations with approximately 5 colleagues; we exchange e-mails and talk via Facebook. The situation that I'm in is new for them as well and I don't know how to act in this situation either.

They don't really try to get in touch with me. To be honest, I haven't looked for contact either. Some of my previous colleagues stated that they aren't interested in having any contact with me. I respect their decision and I don't look for contact with them either.

What do you expect for the near future regarding your relationship with the Church or just in general?

I do hope that everything is going to be fine and that my status is going to be settled. I mean, I am going to get relief and hopefully, I can have a Catholic wedding ceremony.

If there is a bigger demand for more priests, maybe the Church will need me and I could get some role in a parish. And hopefully, if my status is settled, I can get in touch with particular organizations.

For example, there is a group for people who left the priesthood and I got in touch with the leader. They have meetings every year where they share their experiences and give advice in how to solve various problems, how to start a new life, or even just how to handle the whole situation.

By the way, I have to do a great job here in my family; we have to raise the children. School starts soon so we have a lot to do. So now this is what I have

to focus on.

If there was a chance in the Catholic Church for priests to get married, would you go back to doing pastoral work?

Sure. As I told you, I really loved my vocation; I love to teach and to help people. So if there was a chance to be there for the people like before, and meanwhile, to be here for my family, I can say yes; I would go back to my 'job'.

I am trying to get somewhere and to integrate somehow

A Testimony of a Former Priest

Interview with Topteile, Romania
Interview Held in Hungarian by Nagy Katalin
Translated into English by Alexandru Szabo

Key words: ex-priest, celibacy, hierarchy, family, community, discipline

How do you relate to the Roman Catholic Church?

My relation to the Church was quite professional and spiritual. I was a priest. Today, I am looking for my place in the Church. I am trying to get somewhere and to integrate somehow into the community. As one finds his or her Catholic Christian identity within the Church, he or she also needs a sense of belonging to that community.

How did you manage to integrate?

We cannot talk at all about community integration. However, there are good intentioned people, families and couples, who focus on faith, morals, and the command of loving one's neighbor, who accepted me. They accepted me because I am a person, and not for what I was or was not anymore. It is important to see that there are people who live their lives according to canons and those who do not link their faith to canons but to love that determines all their religious work.

You were a priest who got married and today you are a father of two beautiful children. How do you see the Church's attitude towards the issue of priestly celibacy?

My experience in my home country is not positive. I have the feeling that we try to sweep these problems under the rug.

I read that last year 130,000 out of 400,000 religious persons had abandoned their vocation. I think that it is about 26 - 27%. This problem should not be assumed to be a simple one and it shouldn't be so easily swept under the rug.

It is so hard for a priest to change his vocation, to live faith while being formally excluded from the community and prohibited from receiving the sacraments. If you primarily preach about mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation, then on this front, the rules of the Church should be much more flexible, because concerning these persons, including me, only the punishment is applied.

What should we live for? After laicization, we are prohibited from receiving sacraments that are carriers of grace by which we can connect more closely to the Church. In particular, we are prohibited from the sacraments of Confession and Communion. It does not help at all to bring you back on the right path. Rather, it completely excludes you. I consider it to be an offensive punishment.

How did you succeed in living your faith?

I live my faith in my family. If your partner supports you, then it is possible to maintain the faith even if you are not in the bosom of the Church but somewhere in Her periphery. If you cannot find that support in family members, then it is very difficult since there is no support from the institutional Church.

If there is no official support from the Church, what about unofficially? Are there any friends, former colleagues with whom you maintained a good relationship?

There are individual cases. Nevertheless, some colleagues with whom I am in contact asked me to keep the fact that we are in contact a secret. If it would be known in public that they were talking to or trying to help such persons like me, they might be despised. This is what they told me.

You and your family lived in Western Europe. How would you describe the situation there compared to your home country?

It is totally different. Actually, the difference is like between heaven and earth. The attitude and acceptance of persons like me there cannot be compared to our country. There, they put more accents on Christian values. Probably, they were also thinking that I am a man who made a mistake

because I changed my vocation. However, they accepted me as a person, as a person that is still alive. We were invited to take part in various programs and events. We participated in picnics and at choir meetings; we performed some responsibilities for the local Hungarian community, etc.

And at home?

There is nothing at home.

Did you try to find a community at home too?

Yes, but it is very hard to find a community for someone like me. Here, the people are convinced that priests who have left the priesthood are apostates, someone who betrayed not only his vocation, but also his faith, the Church, and even God.

You were a priest for several years and now you are a father and a husband. Do you think that family life is somehow compatible with a priestly vocation?

Absolutely. If the priest lives his marriage according to Christian values, he could be a role model for all, especially today when less and less people opt for the family and those who are married divorce too easily. A priest and his family might witness to others, in parishes entrusted to him, how to live out Christianity in the family. A married priest might be closer to people than a celibate priest. I do not want to deny the value of celibacy; however, it cannot be said that family life is not for the priest.

Do you think that the Church would consider allowing married priests?

Not in the near future.

What, according to you, prevents the Church from doing so?

Many people claim that Church leadership is afraid that the abolition of celibacy would disintegrate the Church because there would not be enough financial resources. However, in my opinion, it is not the main problem. The main problem is general indifference to reconsider and to solve this issue. The Church's leadership has no interest in confronting this issue since the average age of bishops is over 60. They already lived 30-40 years without having their own families and family life doesn't mean anything for them.

What do you miss as a parish priest and appreciate now as a husband and father?

I was missing stability and support. I never felt that my priest colleagues were there for me if I had a problem. There was no support on the diocesan or deanery levels for solving problems or simply spiritual conversations. There are many problems. There were issues that nobody would gladly speak about; nobody was looking for solutions and we were just sweeping them under the rug.

Is there anything you miss from your vocation?

I miss being around people as their parish priest.

If you could serve again as a married priest in a parish, would you accept it?

Such a decision does not depend only on me now. As a family man, I should talk to my spouse about that. However, I guess I would be willing to accept it.

You know about other priests that live in secret with their partners. What do you think of these double life situations?

With a divided heart, there is nothing that can be done well. But I would be the last person to throw a stone at anyone.

What do you wish to be changed or improved in the Church during the next ten years?

I have a feeling that a lot of laypeople, priests, and bishops do not communicate with the Holy Spirit and as a consequence, they are not led by Him. I wish that there would be more praying souls in the Church and more cooperation with the Holy Spirit.

No matter how strange it is to say it, I still hope

A Celibate Priest in a Relationship Speaks about His Relations with the Church and His Partner

Interview with Stefan, Romania
Interview Held in Hungarian by Nagy Katalin
Translated into English by Alexandru Szabo

Key words: priest without a parish and without pastoral duties, celibate, relation in secret, sexuality

How would you describe your relationship with the Roman Catholic Church?

Do I relate to the Church at all? Of course, I relate to Her through the fact that I am a priest. Therefore, there is an external attachment that links me literally with the Church. However, my inner relation to the Church is quite relative at the moment. I'm not sure whether I am intimately related to Her. Strange, but it might be that the outer rituals relate me inwardly. At least for now. Since I do not work in a parish, there is also no physical place in the Church to which I am linked to or where I would belong.

How did this relationship change over time? How did you get to your current situation?

When I was a parish priest, I was bound to a specific local community. I felt responsible for about 3,000 parishioners. Maybe, this was my most intimate relation to the Church. Then, life just moved on. The parish life and my work were not conditioned only by traditions, but also by the everyday needs of my community. I could shape it, more or less.

However, when I took over other non-pastoral duties, my relation to the Church changed completely. I feel like I am now intimately independent from

the Church. Therefore, I cannot say that I have a firm relation to Her.

How was it before you became a parish priest?

In general, I would say that it was very important for me to be a part of the Church, i.e. to belong to the universal Catholic Church. It was as if I was a lifelong member of a football fan club.

Why did this type of attachment change? Have the circumstances changed or has something else happened in your life?

I have changed. Eventually, I made myself more independent. Earlier, I accepted everything that came from the Church, even things that I didn't understand and couldn't explain. Today, it is more difficult to accept such things.

Is there any particular teaching that you cannot accept?

The Church is too interested in the intimate and private lives of Her members. She is also interested in any topic that is linked to our private lives, who we live with, how we live out our intimate relationships, etc. However, in our times, an institution like the Church cannot prescribe to people how they should behave in their private lives. Even the believers will not follow such prescriptions. The paths might be shown, it could be pointed out in one way or another, but nothing should be imposed on anybody.

What hinders the Church to move from the prescribed rules towards more open and personal guidance?

For example, the given explanation regarding the question of whether priests should be celibate or married refers to the kingdom of heaven. Such an explanation, even if it has a spiritual content, does not convince me. I am not saying that it is wrong and hence not true, but I think that the real reason why the Church does not move forward regarding this issue is very simple. In my opinion, the basic reason why celibacy is still compulsory lies in the fact that someone is still convinced that celibate priests are easier controlled, transferred, used, and guided. However, such a conviction cannot be confirmed in practice and it is wrong on a theoretical level as well.

On the other hand, I think, that for the great majority of believers, it is not important whether a priest lives in celibacy. Very few people value a priest's work because of his solitude or celibacy. In my opinion, celibacy is not relevant anymore. On the contrary, it creates problems on many levels.

What is important for people regarding the priest's work?

The most important thing is to be available, addressable, and to have time for people. However, contrary to what is formally assumed, it doesn't mean to be available twenty-four hours a day. The idea behind the mentioned assumption is that the celibate priest might be available all the time.

People expect to communicate with a priest directly and not through ten offices. When a priest is with them, he should pay attention to them. He should not give ready-made recipes when people turn to him with their problems but he should be able to listen to them. I am convinced that they expect him to be a prayerful person, even if they cannot express this idea themselves. However, married priests might be prayerful persons as well.

The other thing I cannot agree with is that our Church establishes cannons not only regarding marriage, but also with respect to conjugal relationships. She prescribes how the couples should be together, how they should plan to have children, and that they have to avoid contraception. It is indeed ridiculous. I think that the majority of people also consider these directions ridiculous. It would be more practical if a priest would present them as one option from many one can choose from. That would be more humane. Additionally, instructions that everyone has to adhere to 'natural family planning' must be repealed because nobody takes them seriously anymore.

Does this mean that legal and moral provisions often exclude the important element of individual responsibility?

That is a difficult issue. It is inevitable for the Church to impose directions. Regarding these specific issues, it is not good to eliminate the personal liability of each person. I think that a lot of people who overcome these issues became immune to the Church's teachings. I also liberate myself in this field and I do not have a bad conscience because of it. However, it is very well known how the official Church leadership reacts to such thoughts.

You live in a relationship. To what extent are you forced to live a double life and what does this life look like?

There are no external constraints. It is a kind of inner compulsion to accept this relationship as a double life for the last fifteen years. The relationship and the processes related to it evolved in me apart from my clerical career. I never felt that it was an impediment for me to serve as a priest, but I do not claim that it doesn't affect me. I'm not the priest I have imagined myself to be since

I was preparing to live a celibate life and I thought that I would seriously stick to it. However, I never felt that I evolved in the wrong direction, or that I have problems in my priesthood, and that I'm not able to work properly. Obviously, if it were not so, I might have left the priesthood or ended the relationship. These two options are possible and I think and live as if these two options are compatible. They would be compatible in my public life too if they were allowed.

What would happen if you made your relationship public?

While I am still a priest?

Yes, if you say publicly that you have a relationship?

I do not really keep it a secret. However, I'm not saying it to everyone.

But, if I were to marry now, it would immediately bring ecclesiastical penalties since such an action would go against Church discipline. I would be expelled from all ecclesiastical circles.

Can you speak about it to family members and friends?

Almost all of my close family members as well as some friends know about it. However, I am very careful to whom, when, and what I say.

How did those with whom you shared this so far accept that you have a relationship?

I do not know. I cannot measure this. The truth is that I do not feel any constraint on me to talk about it. There was a time when I wanted to talk about it more often. There are those who support me and accept me also in these circumstances; others expect me to leave the priesthood and to get married, and still, others expect me to end the relationship as soon as possible. All three opinions are present in the attitude of those with whom I talked frankly about my relationship. I really do not care about what other people presume. I mainly pay attention to what is happening inside of me.

What motivates you to remain a priest now?

I think that I might be a priest in a different way. I could be different than an ordinary priest because I do not pay so much attention to appearance but to the person's inner life. In other words, I am still a priest because I think that people need such an approach. I already mentioned earlier what the needs of believers are. A priest should not teach them nor give commands,

but he has, somehow, to stay close to them. If they need some kind of support, I will be close to them. I think that this is what I can do.

How do you get energy?

Within the Church or in general?

Privately speaking. In prayer life, in a relationship?

I get it from my partner in the time we spend together. However, it is still very important to be solitary sometimes. Since I do not work as a parish priest, it is like life in a hermitage. But it has its own values too. The time spent in intimacy as well as the times spent separated are very good for a relationship. It brings positive tensions and dynamics. If there are good dynamics, it should be okay. The solitude reinforces the eagerness for each other as well. The solitude itself as well as the prayer in solitude give me energy.

What would change in your life if you could get married and remain a priest?

It would make the times of solitude shorter and we would be more together. Now, it is the opposite; I have more solitude and we spend less time together. There wouldn't be other significant changes in our lives. The fact that something could be changed externally is not so important. If we were to get married, it would not be because of the environment nor because it would be important to our families...

I have no intention to speak about the meaning of family and marriage but these issues and their understandings should be demystified and reconsidered too.

The double life is probably full of stress. Is it a burden to you, something that you would like to get rid of?

No. I think that for me this relationship does not create additional stress. In the beginning, I was afraid that someone would find out about us. However, I am not afraid anymore. Something happened in our relationship, some kind of practice that weakened this fear. Roughly, we know what bad could happen if our partnership would be revealed. Some people probably have suspicions but we do not care about this. Really, I am not afraid if it were to be revealed or what would happen if it became known to the public. The relationship is my personal choice.

How do you see the Church in ten years? You mentioned natural family planning, priestly celibacy, etc. Will the Church's teaching change in the next few years?

Society is going to change, one way or another. I cannot explain it but there will be less successful lifelong relationships. The health aspects of family planning and everything associated with fewer side effects will be brought to the forefront, and there will be less and less people who would be ready to stick to natural family planning. Today, the vast majority decide for themselves, and in the future, the number of people who will not be ready to follow the present directions of the Church will only increase. When it comes to celibacy, I believe that fewer and fewer colleagues of mine will be able to keep their promises.

I think that in ten years from now, there will be less believers who would live their lives following the official teachings of the Church. Will the official doctrine move on; who will change directions and doctrines, and how will they be changed? These are 'million dollars questions'.

Even though I have seen how the Church didn't move in this area within the last fifteen years, I still hope that something might happen. No matter how strange it is to say it, I still hope, although such hope is not based on rational evidence. However, I believe that the Holy Spirit will endeavor and persevere and eventually, for once, He will be heard.

What is natural in every other situation is exceptional in the Church

Personal Statement after Having Ended Priestly Ministry

Essay Written by David, Hungary
Translated from Hungarian into English
by Hajnalka Tamas

Key words: Church services, Pope Francis, behavior within the institution of the Church, sinful Church, leaving the priesthood, celibacy, sterile priests, small communities

The issue is interesting because it addresses a relation. Strictly speaking, the question indeed concerns those priests who have quit their ministry and are seeking to find their place again in the Church. Its content, however, interpreted personally, also urges me to reflect on whether I want a place in the institution of the Church.

The Church's theological discourse and Her activity, defined on this basis, are clear. The community built on Christ, administering sacraments, and the exhortation to perform acts of charity are all criteria to circumscribe the existence of the Church as well as Her area of responsibility. Yet, the way in which this community, impeccably substantiated from a theological point of view, manifests itself in everyday life, in fact, raises the question: Should one really belong to it? I would like to clarify my argumentation with two events.

1. Although my priesthood had been suspended and terminated, I continue to pay the Church tax. Granted, I do not receive nor do I expect any services in exchange. I do this following the spirituality of Saint Ignatius. According to him, a spirituality worth living for a person who trusts God presupposes an obligation – beyond providing for one's self and one's family – to support the Church as well as the poor. The Church tax in my case is a mere donation to

an institution, made on the basis of this spirituality. I could give it to any Church organization, yet I still believe that, since I was a priest in the Catholic Church, I should continue to support Her. For my part, this deed confirms that I hold no grudge against the Catholic Church in spite of my personal history.

When I paid the tax last time, I asked the priest: Do many people pay the Church tax? He answered that since people no longer fear that the priest would not bury them, the payment of the Church tax is waning. In my view, this story reflects that Church communities, for many people, function as service-providing institutions. Whoever pays receives something in exchange. However, those who no longer expect anything from the Church do not pay anymore. Clergymen themselves have the same attitude. When administering the sacraments, they recover several years' worth of backlog owed to the Church. In the background of this attitude lies the fact that, in my experience, clergymen provide poor quality services. They bill for activities that many people, out of a past habit, still include in the Church's area of activity.

However, since the people's attitude toward the Church has changed, those who are not bound to Her by faith opt rather for a civil funeral service, which is much more personal and better organized, both with regard to music and to the eulogy. They expect quality in exchange for payment. The same phenomenon will slowly characterize weddings as well. It's just that the possibility for weddings organized aesthetically and without the involvement of the Church did not yet receive enough publicity in Hungary. Thus, people are not aware of it.

Still, in the case of weddings, it is not the sacrament that people seek. Rather, the myth of solemnly proceeding in and out of the church is still present in them. This is what they are willing to pay for. I have already participated at lakeside weddings where the environment, the processions, and the speeches formed a beautiful ceremony, and the participants considered them more beautiful than church weddings.

Ever since my activity as a priest has been brought to an end and I have been looking for a spiritual community attached to a church, my experiences verify my conviction that the Church, as a service-providing institution, does not always perform Her duty well in contemporary society. Many people would want to go to church because they want to draw spiritual strength from the Mass and from the homily. But the atmosphere of the Mass does not fulfill in many of them the desire for spiritual relief. Thus, after one or two attempts, they give up. In contemporary society, it is not the prescription of

the Commandments of the Church that gives meaning to attending the Sunday Mass, but spiritual recharge. This, in turn, does not happen. Thus, more and more, only those people demand the services of the Church who, for some reason – and these reasons can best be traced back to the superstitious fear of God’s judgment – do not dare to skip Church when organizing family feasts or events that, given the sacraments or sacramentals celebrated on those occasions, are still perceived by the public conscience as community feasts belonging to the Church.

While I was an active priest, I deliberately paid attention to the fact that the Holy Mass, Baptism, a wedding, and a funeral ought to be events that form a substantial part of family celebrations and truly improve the atmosphere of the family feast. This is why I endeavored to build up both the Mass and how the sacraments are administered in such a way that they become an experience for those involved, both spiritually as well as from the point of view of ‘formality’ and appearance, lest those involved come to regret the time allotted to the church event.

I always had reservations against ‘showman’ priests. I felt pity towards the priests who were suffering from boredom, who performed the rituals strictly *à la lettre*. This was not a judgment, but rather a pain that I felt because the essence of ministry and the expectations of the people were not being met by those priests. This is why I endeavored to secure church events that were spiritually profound, yet without any special show-elements: to serve the people who reserved one hour every week for church life or who integrated the opportunities offered by the Church in the important events of their lives, and of their family.

As for self-formation, I visited the worship services of priests and pastors, whose work has a good reputation, regardless of religion. The attendance rate at my church confirmed how this view and this attitude were sound.

After I ceased to perform priestly activities, I visited all the churches of my town. And I did not find a Catholic place where I would go back heartily and regularly. However, a Lutheran pastor and a village parish priest knew how to offer, both formally as well as spiritually, that which I was seeking – along with many other people – and for which I go to church heartily and regularly, according to my inner needs.

Since I myself am not content with the Church as a service-providing institution and I am now considering the situation from the other side of the altar, I can better understand the arguments of those people who do not

support the Church. At times, I feel that I am an accomplice because I support an institution that provides such poor service. Through my support, I am not serving the renewal but the persistence of a bad situation. Insofar as the support would cease, the institution of the Church would be hard-pressed to renew Herself out of necessity and to perform Her duty in conformity with spiritual needs. The abovementioned spirituality absolves me from being an accomplice: It is my moral duty to support both the Church and the poor, and the accountability is not my lot.

2. I turn to the second story. Since the election of Pope Francis, the media has been loud about the humanity of the new head of the Church. I do not dispute this. I myself heartily read his thoughts and often reflect on them. However, I treat his person with reserve.

The world press reported that back when he was the Argentinian Jesuit provincial, he abandoned two Jesuits who were sanctioned to die, and for their escape we can only thank God's providence. This, however, did not receive special media coverage in Hungary. The weight of the story is presented personally by one of the Jesuits in his own book. A journalist also presents the story in a detective book. I intentionally do not give names; one can search for them with little effort.

The story is worthy of remembrance because it helps us to understand the behavior within the institution of the Church. A Vatican spokesperson called the story a calumny, which I find to be a great mistake, and which reflects the ideological and real situation of the Church. The ideology is that Peter had denied Christ three times, yet he could still be the leader of the Church. With this argumentation, one can cover many thwarted instances. In contrast, the reality is that, notwithstanding all this invocation of Peter's stumbling, a person who has power lacked the courage to admit an abandonment of this magnitude. Yet, this deed decided the fate of two persons for decades.

Let us imagine that years ago the life of Father Bergoglio changed in such a way that he would have no opportunity to become the Pope, and he gave up being a priest altogether. The same people would impute to him the same abandonment, which is seen today as a calumny and which is kept today as a secret. They would hold him accountable for committing an unforgivable act. This is how an institution, although aware of human weakness, loses its credibility and becomes hypocritical. As long as human weakness does not take concrete shape, this institution accepts it; but, depending on the circumstances, if it is in the institution's interest, it covers the weakness. Moreover, if covering-up is not in the institution's interest, it punishes the

weakness. As examples, I would recall: The often outrageously thwarted deeds of certain priests as a phenomenon over which eyes are closed and the problem is smoothed over; and, in contrast, the situation of the remarried, who are liable for punishment. This duplicity undermines credibility.

The election of the Holy Father brought to light another one of the Church's thwarted practices. The events of the first days already made it obvious that, throughout time, the Church has become an institution estranged from the world. The great majority of the priests, those who could change this situation, are likewise estranged from the world. The opening window fostered by Pope John XXIII, as well as the topic often employed by the present Pope in his speeches – to take in those who seek – are feeble attempts to solve the real situation. In its current state, this institution is unable to achieve the expected change, in spite of the Pope's encouragements. The institutional lifestyle of the Church does not conform to contemporary society, not even if She desired this.

The patterns of behavior toward the Pope point both to this phenomenon and to how thwarted the situation is. Social networks have shared the picture in which the Pope did not travel in his own car, but was sitting among cardinals in a small bus. Another picture travelled around the world, a picture in which the Pope did not wear red shoes, but he continued to wear his own comfortable shoes. Most recently, they wrote that he does not accept the papal residence, but he remains in a more homely and more comfortable residence. As a matter of fact, these deeds of the Pope represent a conduct that is obvious for any person with sound reasoning. The majority would act in a similar way. Why should the Pope be solitary; why should he wear uncomfortable shoes; or why should he live in a home in which he does not feel at ease? The feedback shows, nonetheless, that what is natural in every other situation is exceptional in the Church and represents an act that requires courage. "Finally, somebody dares to behave normally."

This is a thwarted world, where the normal behavior represents a deviance and draws attention. At the same time, the abnormal behavior, which, actually, is the seedbed of duplicity, became in the course of centuries a form of life. Otherwise the Pope's behavior would not have had such an echo. Furthermore, another shared post according to which the head of the Church decided that he will not pay the Vatican collaborators the bonus customary at papal elections, but he will give it to the poor reflects the one-sidedness of human thinking. This deed was vastly approved and with generosity. The thwartedness of the story is not spectacular because there are no reports

about the reaction of those affected. Still, one comment aptly notes: Would those who approve of this act still approve if, at their workplace, their boss, moved by some inner conviction, decided to use the premium earned by workers to support the poor?

Given Her particular situation, there is perhaps more human thwartedness in the Church than in other social institutions. Ecclesiology even guarantees a *raison d'être* for these thwarted practices. The expression 'sinful Church' can support many inconveniences, and it even offers a theoretical solution. Yet, this solution fails in concrete situations. The break is obvious to whomever observes the Church from the outside because the majority of those who belong to the Church in reality hold as unallowable that which is allowed and that which is tolerated at the level of ideology. Consequently, a hypocritical character develops that defines and discredits in the background the Church's entire activity as an institution. The argument that the Church is a mustard seed or sourdough does not mean in contemporary society that the few elect seek to spread essential things. Rather, it points to the fact that the Church does not seek new ways, in spite of the decreasing numbers; moreover, that She seeks, using biblical imagery, to justify Herself and to maintain Her untenable state.

This train of thought was important for answering the question: Is there a place for me in the Church? In my opinion, a person who formerly was a priest and gave it up for whatever reason, no longer has a place in the institution of the Church. To understand such a change of life would require a generosity that is not to be found in the representatives of the institution of the Church. One cannot generalize the generosity and understanding of merely a few persons.

Leaving ministerial priesthood is a fateful event that everybody has to accept personally with the help of long prayers and perhaps, as the will of God. Most other pursuits can be explained, in my view, with the inability of the affected person to accept his fate in its entirety.

In most cases, I hold that priests who no longer practice their ministry are searching for a place in the Church as a way of compensation. Some people continue to search for their place in the Church because they depend on Her for subsistence. If the institution of the Church would not punish these people, and would ensure further employment possibilities, this would be a real expression of Her generosity.

For the most part, leaving the priesthood does not mean giving up a

system of values; it rather means a change of lifestyle. This change of lifestyle, in turn, does not mean that the same person is no longer capable of carrying out ecclesiastical duties, such as acts of charity, the management of ecclesiastical institutes, etc. Instead, those who search for work in the framework of the Church meet with, for the most part, disappointment. Where the Church leader is generous and flexible – a situation which is a rarity in the case of priests who quit their ministry – these people might find employment to ensure their subsistence.

I know a Jesuit who continued to teach at the same Jesuit university even after he left the priesthood. Such cases, however, are very rare. Whereas the answer to the question: “Does the Church have a place for a priest after he has ended his ministerial priesthood?” depends exactly on whether the institution of the Church is able to employ him in some area. The situation is worth mentioning because the greatest cross of leaving the priesthood is the uncertainty of one’s subsistence. Employment opportunities are limited for these priests, given the special training a job requires. On the other hand, they are confronted for a while with vulnerability and existential insecurity, which was unknown to them before. To step out is to jump to one’s death.

Ministerial priesthood and monasticism are lifestyles in which the real weight of material uncertainty does not even occur. The system levels the material deficit of the subunits even in the case of bad economic decisions. The subsistence of a priest and that of a monk is ensured in every circumstance.

I myself was confronted only later with the real weight of not having a regular income, of not being able to cover my daily expenses, or having to live in fear of losing my job. Yet, in contemporary society, most people live with these uncertainties on a daily basis. In light of this, I now appreciate even more the sacrifice of those people who support their Church communities in spite of their uncertain circumstances. Perhaps, ministerial priests do not even realize the extent of these sacrifices.

After having left the priesthood, some manage to solve their subsistence problems and to find a job that might turn into a new vocation: For them, it is easier to accept and to adapt to the loss of their priesthood. In this way, however, they change their very attitude towards the Church.

When the issue is addressed, I myself ponder it according to whether I need the institution of the Church, given that I am happy with my new lifestyle and with my work. Does the Church contribute something so that

happiness does not render me self-important? Does She contribute something so that the temporary loss of happiness does not make me despair?

Priestly Celibacy as One of the Main Problems

When we consider the place that men who have ended their priestly ministry perhaps no longer have in the Church, it is worthwhile to examine the phenomenon of priestly celibacy. This, in fact, is one of the main reasons for remaining within the Church as well as for going away.

I always found priestly celibacy to be a meaningful thing. I lived it as a possibility that offers more time for prayer, self-formation, the giving of one's personal time to people, things that come to fruition in one's work in a parish, and in other spiritual works. I chose the monastic lifestyle precisely because I did not sympathize with the idea that married men could assume a priestly role.

Even now, as a married person, I still think that, while having a family, I could not carry out my priestly duties as well as I endeavored to do so as a celibate person. The possibility that priests would marry – and more exactly, that married men would be ordained as priests – forms the object of many disputes. In my opinion, men who raise their children bear witness to a longstanding and harmonious family life; given their formation as well as their spirituality, they could carry out the work of a priest. Once ordained, they could tend to the duties of the priest in a smaller community. Yet, for the moment, this is a utopia. These presuppositions can acquire validity only after their implementation. I am not convinced, however, that a married person could find a balance between tending to the spiritual leadership of a larger community and maintaining family harmony. One of the two would be damaged and, sooner or later, the pressure to show a good example would bring about hypocrisy. If, in turn, the harmony in a priest's family would be damaged, or end in divorce, then he would lose the credibility of his preaching. Currently, the Reformed Church is confronted with this problem.

During my active priesthood, I considered celibacy to have an important role, and I experienced its weight in everyday life. I am talking about a lifestyle that attracts many inner fights. On top of that, the public opinion is also interested in priestly celibacy. At the same time, it provides many reasons for scandal.

A priest takes on his responsibilities as a celibate not because of solitude, but chiefly because he wants to become a friend to people. The friendship of

a priest can be tight or loose. A person with a sound spirituality feels the boundaries of proximity and distance. If a priest is open to people, he sooner or later experiences passion, imagined or real. Such friendship between a priest and a lady can get too close, and they both can cross the boundaries of an interpersonal relationship. Then, at an emotional level, the spotlight is taken by their being a man and a woman, which ends up in varying degrees of sexual expression. This is a difficult, yet instructive process in the life of a priest. For the essence of celibacy is not that priests are not attracted to passion, but that passion helps them to better realize that, as long as they want to remain credible priests, they cannot maintain longstanding relationships based on passion, especially if these relationships receive sexual expression.

A long-term relationship between a man and a woman, a relationship which involves sexual intimacy, not only changes a person emotionally, but it takes time away from one's priestly duties; it carries the danger of public scandal, and it estranges the priest from the other members of the Church community. These factors damage one's credibility. A similar phenomenon occurs in family life as well as in priestly life. Under the influence of passion, one's behavior changes and it requires purification. Passion can hamper a priest's credible lifestyle. At the same time, he is forced to start a new process of decision-making. Since the majority of ecclesiastical superiors are afraid of these emotional periods, they do not manage this spiritual process properly.

One's spiritual advisor and superior often disagree in their opinion on this subject. The spiritual advisor knows the history of that person, his spiritual struggles, and his spiritual development. He obtains this knowledge by observing how one's spirituality takes shape. This knowledge enables him to trust the person and to help him develop a credible priestly profile.

When a priest overcomes these inner struggles, he no longer has reason to fear, no matter whom he befriends, women or men. He learns the boundaries of personal relationships, and he develops an adequate priestly attitude. There is no problem as long as the friendship does not invite passion. When it does awaken passion, a harsh inner fight begins, indispensable and beneficial from the point of view of credible priestly celibacy. It amounts to a process of dying. The affected priest must answer, free of any external constriction: What is it that motivates him to continue being a priest and how does he reconcile this with celibacy? What kind of arguments can he line up to support celibacy? General criteria that help his decision-making include: extended prayer, extended reading, self-formation, helping others.

There are, at the same time, arguments of an entirely personal kind, through which it becomes progressively obvious for a person that, in order to achieve a certain goal, he ought to live his life as a celibate. The priest who does not decide cannot genuinely experience either priestly life or the beauty of the family. His soul, which he ought to put into his work, would sooner or later crumble. However, one must lead many fights before realizing the obvious. This passion also makes women a sacrifice of this inner fight, since passion is a shared feeling. The affected persons have to integrate this inner fight into their lives as soon as they start feeling passion towards a priest and they allow it free reign. If celibacy, as a lifestyle, represents for a priest part of his vocation, in the end, he remains a celibate in spite of all the feelings of passion. I consider this a fruitful process. I am grateful to the ladies on account of whom I had to undertake these inner fights, and I wish that they too would look back to their own fights as a growth in life. But I am grateful also to my spiritual advisors, who trusted me in the process of purification, because I can use the spiritual experiences acquired back then for the benefit of my present family life.

The ecclesiastical superior who had not experienced in body and soul the blessed state of these inner fights does not choose a correct solution either. The more anxious a superior is, the more scrupulous he becomes. Perhaps, he fears scandal. The more he wants to meet the expectations of his superiors, the worse he handles the situation of a priest who, fighting against passion, is in search of the best way out. However, this superior handles equally as bad the situation of priests who, having already experienced the essence of celibacy, stand on firm ground and are fearlessly nourishing informal relations with ladies. The superior projects his own anxiety on these priests, crying wolf in situations where there is no ground for either fear or scandal. The superior fears that the scandal caused by this passion, or the child born out of such a passion, would put weight on his own shoulders. For this reason, a superior prefers passion-free, sterile priests. He thinks that, if they do not do good, at least they do not cause scandal.

I have already had disputes because of the expression 'sterile'. Yet I think that this expression best reflects the phenomenon that one of my teachers defined as thus: There are priests who invest so much energy in celibacy that they don't have any strength left to accomplish priestly spirituality or to pursue a priest's blessing activities. For the most part, such priests only have their career for compensation. They perform the Holy Mass, but compare the kiss of the altar to the kiss of a woman; they call the breviary their wife; and

when they allow themselves to love, it is by choosing female saints as role models. In the meantime, a world estranged from life matures in them, rendering their activity fruitless. As a matter of fact, even their superiors cannot rely on them in critical situations.

The superior would best prefer priests who both excel in their priestly activity and are above reproach in their celibacy. But they do not properly take into account that the development of this type of spirituality is a process which involves, besides solitude and failure, the experience of passion as well. Without walking the road one cannot arrive at the finish line. The credible priestly profile sought after in contemporary society cannot be completed without going through this process.

In my experience and opinion, the development of a credible and good priestly profile presupposes that the priest experiences the adventure of passion. Nobody should be afraid of this. The vow of priestly celibacy is not a static thing, but a spirituality; one understands it better when one feels and concretely experiences passion. Those who decide between the ages of 18-20 to pursue studies to become priests – those who take the vow of celibacy at the age of 25 – do not completely realize why they take up this spirituality. Their motivations take shape when they experience the real chances of losing their celibacy and when they frequently retreat into solitude. On the basis of these motivations, they strengthen the conviction that they can carry out their God-given vocation only through a celibate lifestyle. It is difficult to represent this duty in a credible way without first having experienced passion and the ensuing re-assumption of celibacy. Otherwise the priest would close himself into the fruitless prison of loneliness. Those few who would manage to become people of prayer and contemplation in this loneliness might become mystics. However, only few live with this chance. The community would learn about such priests, and they would seek to attend their Mass, their homily. I experience this need in my environment; its realization, however, I scarcely experience.

When a superior's intervention into a priest's struggle against passion is not made with adequate tact and wisdom, this external interference into the life of the priest causes traumas. These traumas can hinder the flourishing of a credible priestly activity over several years.

The adequate tact and wisdom of the superior was missing in the case of many priests who have left the priesthood. We could say that many priests left the priesthood as a consequence of the superior's malpractice. I count among the best known malpractices that the priest struggling with passion is liable to

re-location and appointment in difficult places, or he is forced to make an immediate decision. Such occurrences of malpractice prevent the process of growth that is important for the development of credible priestly celibacy. Instead of being coated with understanding, this process results in the judgment and liability of the affected persons. When this judgment and liability is not spectacular enough, it can lead to a slow distortion of personality.

The situation is complicated by the fact that those affected must endure not only the burden of neglect, but a stall in their advancement within the Church hierarchy as well. For this too happens as a consequence of the said phenomenon. Some people have every leadership quality, but in terms of celibacy, their spiritual development is still in progress; as a result, they reach a dead-end. Others, who are already established in leading positions, choose to confront their passion: When their confrontation is revealed, they are replaced.

The more favorable positions in the Church hierarchy are being held by persons whose inadequacy to lead might even be disregarded as long as they are chaste in their celibacy, which is highly esteemed. These two phenomena meet in the concealment of passion and the positive evaluation of blameless celibate persons when it comes to progress in the Church hierarchy. They incite even more hypocrisy within the institution of the Church.

Church leaders cannot grow into the kind of spiritual persons that society seeks because they rose to leading positions not by the merit of their leadership charisma, but by their irreproachable celibacy. In ecclesiastical circles, the bishop's role is anecdotally connected to the original sin of the first man – the intellect of both the first man and the bishop becomes clouded and their will inclines towards evil. This is bad, even if it were a joke. Yet, since this observation often hides a true foundation, its reality is even more painful.

This overview attempts to show that many Church leaders lead a lifestyle estranged from real life. In their decisions, they do not pay attention to the fruitful fate of the people entrusted to them. Contrastingly, if one has an understanding and wise superior, he can succeed at every level and become fit for all priestly activities. My experience with celibacy and the ecclesiastical position is that a person who develops his priestly profile under the guidance of an understanding, spiritually experienced, and wise superior is able to represent in a credible way both his celibacy as well as his own place within the hierarchy. At the same time, as far as I know, the lives of many priests

have been broken because their superiors did not handle the situation with adequate wisdom and tact.

Besides the mutual influence of a sterile lifestyle, wrapped in celibacy, and an ecclesiastical career, a third observation is worth mentioning, namely the capital sin of envy.

I think, and I read this from priests' behavior and declarations, that many celibate men who do not experience passion might suffer – at least in their subconscious – from the capital sin of envy. This happens not only to priests, but also to persons who would want but have not yet been given a family. In the case of priests, envy is not openly talked about because they undertook a celibate lifestyle not by fate, but by a conscious decision. In priestly celibacy, which they embrace collectively, they see the sign of solidarity. But, if they are void of spiritual generosity, they prohibit fellow priests from doing everything that, for some reason, they do not dare to allow for themselves. This becomes especially obvious through passion. The most thwarted thing of all is that they legitimize their attitude by claiming to care for the spiritual salvation of others. They say that they pray for these others, yet their deeds show that they lack understanding.

This dual attitude creates many thwarted, disputable situations. On one hand, they do not realize that the experience of passion is a useful process of spiritual growth. On the other hand, passion, but mostly their personal fear and anxiety toward sexuality, appears as a taboo, extending to their environment as well. They become guardians of morality who go so far as to consider it a virtue and an obligation to denounce their fellow priests to their superior. What a person with humane thinking perceives as treason becomes, for them, a moral obligation. Their argumentation is pitiful because, while in their justification they fear for the spiritual salvation of others, they cause perhaps life-long damages. They want heaven so badly that they create hell. I doubt that a person with humane thinking would want to tolerate this any longer.

When a priest is deemed by his environment to be a good priest, I presume that he has passed the trial of passion and, consequently, he bears credible witness to the spirituality of celibacy. At the same time, I see priests who uphold celibacy yet their life and activity cannot bear the fruit of spiritual blessing for contemporary society. These persons are disputed even inside the Church. In this regard, I find the overzealous denouncements to be an especially deceitful act.

I know that priests who have had the chance to fight this struggle unbeknownst of others, only assisted by their spiritual advisors, ended up living a credible celibate life; they see its meaning, and people do benefit from their lifestyle. And if some of them, while undergoing spiritual struggle and pondering, have reached the conclusion that they could no longer uphold celibacy, they took the decision to leave the priesthood in spiritual peace. They continue to seek the fulfilment of their vocation elsewhere. However, some priests' similar situations have reached the attention of the superior, and the superior, a prisoner of his own anxiety, judged the situation in a wrong way. These priests suffered spiritual damage, left the institution of the Church with bitterness, and yet, they still search for their place in the Church. With quite low chances.

Personally, I am especially grateful to the spiritual advisors who guided me on the inner roads of spiritual life and who trusted me. They taught me values that are valid for every lifestyle, that offer a guiding thread and a stance in order to succeed in life. I learned a lot from my spiritual struggle with passion. I endeavored to employ what I learned in my spiritual leadership in terms of both leading a credible priestly lifestyle and understanding people.

Is there a Place for the Church in My Life?

Since the initial question awoke these thoughts in me, I am also compelled to answer the question: Does the Church have a place in my life? Answering this question is easier and more straightforward because through it, I must bear witness to the place that the Church, as Christ understands it, has in my life.

I experienced the forging of virtue from denouncements, which I am unable to acknowledge even now. As the consequence of this treason, I was confronted with the wrong handling of the situation by my superior. All of this made me recognize that I can no longer represent credibly and joyfully that priestly spirituality of the importance of which I remain convinced and which contemporary society might also demand. Thus, I renounced my priestly activity not because I had opted for a family lifestyle as an alternative, but because I had to admit that the priestly profile represented by my superior could not be achieved. Since the superior represents, by status, the institution of the Church, from then on, I had to find my place outside of the institution of the Church.

These convictions played an important role in how I now see my family life, granted to me in the aftermath of those events, as an unexpected

enrichment. The first thought of the Jesuit spiritual exercises, their guiding principle and their fundamental truth, states that man has been created to praise God, to honor Him, to serve Him, and to save his/her soul. For me, this thought means the following: I have been created to transform my work into vocation. I ought to trust that, from the fruits of my work, I can provide for myself and for those who have been entrusted to me. I ought to allot resources in support of the Church and of the poor. I ought to develop a family and a working environment that promote sound harmony among the bodily, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and communitarian aspects of life, not only for myself but also for those who have been entrusted to me. These were already important criteria to me when I was a clergyman. Back then, instead of the family, I kept in mind: my monastic order, the brothers from my order, and the members of the Church community that was entrusted to me. I endeavored to expend all of my work and pursuits for their benefit.

The rules of the Jesuit spiritual exercises also teach that in order to understand and achieve the goal that they received from God, men must render themselves indifferent to seeking health more than disease, wealth more than poverty, honor more than scorn, and a long life more than a short one. Extended to all areas of life, the rule of indifference – in other words, *indifferentia* – means that, inasmuch as I interpret and accept everything in my life as the will of God, I should not pit a celibate lifestyle against a family lifestyle. The guiding principle, thus, applies to all people, leading every kind of lifestyle, regardless if they chose celibacy or family or if the two alternate in the life of the same person. The common denominator for both is to lead a life that is pleasing to God and to experience communion, just as the Holy Trinity is communion. If I would live in monastic or priestly celibacy, I ought to live out my celibacy for the benefit of the community. In turn, if I were to lead a family life, I ought to strive for a lifestyle in the bosom of my family that would enable my family to experience, through mutual love, the love of God and of the Holy Trinity.

My personal quest is, thus, an opportunity to develop and nourish my relationship with God. And the fruit of living in a relationship with God is to experience the supporting community. The teachings of Jesus affirm the guidelines for such a personal quest. And Jesus' view of the Church offers support for the building up of the community: I see the Church when we spend an afternoon with families that represent a similar system of values; we pray, we talk, we exchange thoughts. As a result, building family harmony and working diligently become, in our view, tasks received from God. This

strengthens us to accomplish our tasks with success. These meetings are free from judgments because they are not subject to the pressures of the institution and the constrictions of hypocrisy. Thus, everybody views our gatherings as a personal enrichment. We develop an experience that is personal, yet it creates a community that enables us to experience the validity of Jesus' teaching on the Church.

Through such meetings, those who seek Christ's teaching are strengthened in their vocation or in the quest for their vocation. Moreover, they experience community in supporting one another. In light of this idea, I can state that the experience of the community is an experience of the Church. Through it, people become more dedicated to understanding and achieving Christ's teaching.

This triad – which is formed by personal experience, community experience, and a greater personal dedication stemming from them – bears witness to the truth that “where two or three gather in my name, I am among them” (Mt 18:20).

It is worthwhile to organize these meetings because one afternoon can reveal more about the Church and the validity of Jesus' teaching than the study of ecclesiology in its entirety. In this sense, I not only believe, but I also experience that the Church is a humanly enriching community, which enables us to experience the existence of God as well as the teaching of Christ.

Those who think that the institution of the Church helps us to acquire such an experience have a place in the institutionalized Church. Those, in turn, who feel that they do not have such an experience – and I meet such people, such families, more and more – I encourage them to organize themselves. In this way, they can familiarize themselves with the personal and community shaping utility of Christ's view on the Church even without the help of the Church.

Epilogue

I am aware that an essay does emphasize subjective experiences and views. I could list secondary literature to substantiate my thoughts, but I renounce this precisely on account of the genre. I approach the topic as a person who saw how the institution of the Church works from the inside, although its thwartedness is more pronounced on the outside. Although I consider my thoughts to be true, I appeal to the experience and views of the reader in judging how truthful the content is. If my thoughts are met with approval,

this would confirm that I have observed things in a correct way. I do not expect the institution of the Church to change. I simply wish for what I myself seek, namely that as many people as possible would accomplish their goal, receive community support to do so, and enjoy the satisfaction of it.

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