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Quo Vadis, Theology?

Theology in the Context of the Public Sphere

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14 Some Current Challenges of Practical Theology Regarding Christian Practice in Society[1]

Nikola Vranješ

Abstract: Practical or pastoral theology, on the one hand, is called to scientifically research ways and models of improving pastoral activity. On the other hand, this theological discipline touches the wider area of theological discernment of Christian practical expressions in the public sphere. This is quite understandable if, in this area of theological research, one takes seriously the fact that every pastoral action is in some way imbued with cultural elements. This, in turn, means that every pastoral action to some extent has echoes in the cultural sphere of life, which means also in social life itself. These echoes can be stronger or less powerful, but are always present. This circumstance is particularly understandable theologically, starting from the principle of incarnation. Through this lens, the following challenging elements of pastoral reality today are explored in this paper: certain methods of witnessing and preaching, relation to the scientific and technological context, the challenge of fanaticism and fundamentalism, and the challenge of secular exploitation of elements of pastoral reality.
Keywords: practical theology – challenge – culture – society – pastoral activity

14.1 Introduction

The links between pastoral activity, human culture, and society are constitutive and inevitable. The very principle of incarnation indicates the structural connection between faith-based activity and the socio-cultural context of human life. This principle points to the connection between the divine and the human. In this sense, the incarnation also expresses the internal structural interconnectedness of the human experience. By emphasizing this, we do not intend to claim that the Church's pastoral activity has its sources in the culture itself. But it is certainly true that, although it originates in faith, it is inevitably shaped by cultural conditioning and cultural expressions, since faith expresses itself through cultural forms. Establishing an appropriate link between pastoral activity on a wider level and the cultural and social context remains one of the key challenges for theology – and consequently for contemporary practical theology as well.[2]

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2 Pope Francis 2023, no. 8.

About the connection between faith and culture, one of the key problems today is the renewed recognition of the importance of a suitable connection between faith and the elements of contemporary culture. This also raises awareness of suitable models of connection between faith and culture, which may vary depending on the markings of current cultures. Furthermore, the challenges of pastoral practice have a decisive influence not only on the quality of that practice itself but also on its representativeness in society. This will become even more significant in the future, as society is increasingly likely to be shaped by virtual and multimedia culture. For this reason it is essential to develop a particular kind of theological-practical sensitivity to recognize the challenges mentioned above and take appropriate action, thereby enabling the best possible actualization of pastoral activity.

Additionally, the topic of culture is of course directly related to the topic of society and the public sphere of life. Pastoral activity is thus situated at the intersection of cultural and social influence. This means that pastoral activity impacts the social sphere of life, that is, the public sphere of interpersonal relations. Therefore, its mission can partly be observed through the question of the manner and quality of its engagement with that sphere. In this sense, this task inevitably raises the question of the public representation of the Church in society.[3] As has been pointed out, the overall activity of the Church is necessarily intertwined with the relationship to society and culture in different ways and with various intensities.

This paper presents a theological-practical discernment of some major pastoral challenges regarding this relationship. First it examines the echoes and problems of major Christian challenges regarding the relationship to the culture. Then, some larger practical challenges of pastoral practice are presented. Selected challenges concern the area of preaching and witnessing, specific elements of understanding the message of faith, methods of the Christian approach to the public sphere, relations to different social groups, relations to the world of science, as well as the problem of religious fanaticism and fundamentalism, and the problem of the secular exploitation of the elements of pastoral practice of the Church. Although this represents only a limited exploration of the topic, it may nevertheless provide useful insights for contemporary theological-practical discussions on these issues.

14.2 Some methods of today's preaching and witnessing of faith in contemporary society

Raising the issue of witnessing and preaching as the first topic here seems logical, since these activities from the religious sphere leave the first and most noticeable mark in public life. Concerning this question, it is necessary to recall the strongly emphasized need to recognize and appreciate cultural changes, which in postmod-

3 Vranješ 2013, 313–317.

ern times also affect religious life.[4] In the theological-pastoral discourse, as well as pastoral activity, significant difficulties remain in acknowledging this truth. The well-known theological insight concerning the connection between faith and culture is not sufficiently accepted in pastoral practice. In the sense highlighted here, this inside implies that profound cultural changes – changes that are increasingly rapid and more far-reaching – are often neither observed nor genuinely accepted. Moreover, the various components of pastoral practice develop as if their connection with cultural elements and their changes were of little relevance. This lack of attentiveness is one of the key reasons for the insufficiency of pastoral sensitivity to constant cultural changes. As a result, many models of witnessing and preaching prove to be deficient as well, that is, hardly applicable to real life. Ignoring cultural changes and progress leads to the isolation of the pastoral models of action and the many segments of the Church community itself. Although cultures contain significant negative elements, this should not obscure the positive aspects present in many cultural expressions. This positivity should serve as an incentive for the continual renewal and improvement of pastoral activities. This is precisely why it is important to highlight those elements of pastoral and liturgical public engagement, such as homilies and other public preaching methods, which can and should be more strongly marked by elements of a dialogic relationship to the contemporary world and culture. However, many of these approaches remain too heavily shaped by elements of an outdated apologetic framework, which proves inadequate for addressing the realities of the present age. Often, a certain pastoral pragmatism and conformism are concealed within these forms of activity.[5] On the one hand, they reflect attempts to simply acting in complex circumstances, and on the other hand, they can very easily become the expression of certain ideological determinations. Thus, these challenges place specific demands on pastoral or practical theology.

Although other theological and non-theological disciplines (such as liturgical theology, homiletics, and rhetoric) address preaching the Gospel, practical theology must increasingly discern appropriate ways of preaching. Among the key dimensions of this research are language and religious imagination. Both must be revitalized with elements of creative contemporary imagination, especially from the sphere of urban life. Positive aspects of contemporary culture and art, in their many expressions, should inspire dialogical collaboration and the formation of culturally relevant syntheses.[6] This is particularly related to performances in public places and on social media, where the language used, the theological emphases that stand out, the way of relating to certain social groups and issues, as well as the mentality and attitudes that are hidden behind some ways of acting, often raise serious theological questions and veer towards fanaticism. While there are many positive examples of action in public Christian engagement many are limited in terms of depth of content and methodological rigor.

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4 Second Vatican Council 1965, np. 4.

5 Vranješ 2019, 485–489.

6 Pope Francis 2013, no. 143–159.

In some instances, certain forms of public prayer, even if well-intentioned, can become divisive. Examples include broadcasts of homilies and public speeches from preachers, as well as some catechetical videos and social media messages from lay believers and certain groups. These often reveal gaps in theological knowledge or the ability to convey a coherent Christian message. In some instances, the message is reduced to certain questions only, with the attitude towards certain social groups often oversimplified. A particularly significant challenge for Christian public speech today is the practical understanding and interpretation of the Bible. The aforementioned forms of activity appear in different branches of organized activity of believers, although they differ in intensity and scope.[7] Nevertheless, each of these forms represents a particular challenge for both theology and practice today, and will likely require even more sophisticated theological-practical approaches in the future.

14.3 Scientific and technological progress

The specific challenge of practical theology, but also other branches of theology today, is the discernment of the relationship between evangelization and pastoral activities concerning various components of scientific and technological reality. The image of God and the Church greatly depends on the characteristics and models of this relationship, not only in the eyes of the scientific community but also within the broader socio-cultural environment. This very segment shows how important the question of relationship to culture is for theology today. That is why the competent scientific and contextual elaboration of this relationship is its special task.[8] The relationship of the Church, and especially of concrete pastoral activity, to the topic of scientific and technological progress is highly complex. Although it is not possible here to examine this relationship in detail, some aspects that shape pastoral activity in relation to this issue will indicated. It is important to emphasize that the relationship to scientific and technological reality must be articulated more strongly within the theological discourse itself, including within practical theology.[9] However, it is even more important to connect the scope of theological reflection more strongly with the concrete practice of religious life.

Today, there is a widespread appreciation of scientific and technological reality, which is often expected to solve numerous problems and challenges of life. Recognition of the range of scientific and technological progress can be observed in many aspects of religious practice, usually accompanied by understandable caution towards some of its consequences. However, in other areas of religious practice, there is also rejection and sometimes a certain disdain for the indicated progress. In many elements of evangelization and pastoral reality, there is an observable lack of effort to establish an appropriate dialogical relationship with the scientific and technological

7 Vranješ/Selektović 2021, 86–96.
8 Pope Francis 2023, no. 4.
9 Haught 2008, 25.

reality. The failure to connect theological insights about meaning and purpose with life's scientific and technological elements essentially contributes to the fact that religion is not understood as an integral part of life but as a great exception.[10] This points to an inadequate realization of this relationship.

Within theological discourse, various forms of discernment rightly warn of certain pitfalls and negative aspects of scientific and technological progress. This will always be an integral and unavoidable part of both evangelization and pastoral activity. However it is equally necessary to emphasize more strongly the positive aspects of scientific and technological progress and promote a more dialogical relationship between theology and science. One of the first prerequisites for this can be seen in the importance of the new apologetic approach encouraged by Pope Francis:

> Proclaiming the Gospel message to different cultures also involves proclaiming it to professional, scientific and academic circles. This means an encounter between faith, reason and the sciences with a view to developing new approaches and arguments on the issue of credibility, a creative apologetics which would encourage greater openness to the Gospel on the part of all. When certain categories of reason and the sciences are taken up into the proclamation of the message, these categories then become tools of evangelization; water is changed into wine. Whatever is taken up is not just redeemed, but becomes an instrument of the Spirit for enlightening and renewing the world.[11]

A new and creative apologetics of the faith, especially in relation to various components of culture and science, is more than an imperative of our time. Pope Francis also emphasizes this in several documents, particularly those that directly address the fields of higher education and science. The complexity of this imperative becomes evident in some of Pope Francis's inspiring words in the apostolic constitution on ecclesiastic universities and faculties *Veritatis gaudium:*

> The revival of ecclesiastical studies entails the pressing need to give new impulse to the scientific research conducted in our ecclesiastical universities and faculties. The Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia Christiana* presented research as a "primary duty", in constant "contact with reality... to communicate doctrine to [our] contemporaries in various cultures". Yet in today's multicultural and multiethnic world, new social and cultural dynamics impose a broadening of these aims. Indeed, for the Church to carry out her saving mission, "it is not enough that evangelizers be concerned to reach each person... the Gospel is also proclaimed to the cultures as a whole". Ecclesiastical studies cannot be limited to passing on knowledge, professional competence and experience to the men and women of our time who desire to grow as Christians, but must also take up the urgent task of developing intellectual tools that can serve as paradigms for action and thought, useful for preaching in a world marked by ethical and religious pluralism. To do so calls not only for profound theological knowledge, but also the ability to conceive, design and achieve ways of presenting the Christian religion capable of profound engagement with different cultural systems. All this calls for increased quality in scientific research and a gradual improvement in the level of theological studies and related sciences. It is not only a matter of extending the field of diagnosis and of adding to the mass of available data for interpreting reality, but of a deeper study that seeks "to communicate more effectively the truth of the Gospel

10 Delio 2017, 102.

11 Pope Francis 2013, no. 132.

> in a specific context, without renouncing the truth, the goodness and the light which it can bring wherever perfection is not possible." It is to research conducted in ecclesiastical universities, faculties and institutes that I primarily entrust the task of developing that "creative apologetics" which I called for in *Evangelii Gaudium*, in order to "encourage greater openness to the Gospel on the part of all."[12]

The concrete practical relationship to the components of scientific and technological reality is even more complex when connected to some specific elements of theological-practical discourse today. First and foremost, there is the need for a deeper and, consequently, more sophisticated dialogue with the scientific community.[13] Such a dialogue is not only a scientific issue, but also connected to the concrete lives of people, i.e., to the practice. This reality, seen in the light of the incarnation, helps deepen the understanding of the mystery of God's Word, that is, of theological truths themselves. The Pope emphasizes in this regard the following:

> Ecclesiastical studies will thus be poised to make their specific and unique contribution of inspiration and guidance, and will be able to articulate and express in a new, challenging and realistic way their proper task. So it has always been and so shall it ever be! Theology and Christian culture have lived up to their mission whenever they were ready to take risks and remain faithful on the borderline. "The questions of our people, their suffering, their battles, their dreams, their trials, their worries possess an interpretational value that we cannot ignore if we want to take the principle of the Incarnation seriously. Their wondering helps us to wonder ourselves, their questions question us. All this helps us to delve into the mystery of the Word of God, the Word that requires and asks that we dialogue, that we enter into communion."[14]

Once again, Pope Francis's statements confirm the importance of dialogue between the theological and practical reality of the Church and the scientific and technological community, while taking into account both cultural and theological dimensions. Future pastoral practice will necessarily require higher levels of engagement in this kind of dialogue if it is to remain meaningful and maintain its cultural relevance.

14.4 Religious fanaticism and fundamentalism

As is well known, the image of Christianity and the Church in society can be distorted or misrepresented in various ways. Religious fanaticism and fundamentalism are certainly among the most common causes of such phenomena. For this reason practical theology must increasingly develop approaches that allow it to distinguish between the phenomena of religious fanaticism and fundamentalism within pastoral activity and to assess their influence on it. Occurrences of this type are becoming more visible, more frequent, and more influential in different segments of pastoral activity.

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12 Pope Francis 2017, no. 5.

13 Today, theological-pastoral sophistication is one of the key imperatives in pastoral-catechetical activity as such. Vranješ 2019, 490–500.

14 Pope Francis 2017, no. 5.

This paper is not the appropriate context for a detailed elaboration of the concepts themselves, nor for an extensive discussion of the differences between the concepts of 'fanaticism' and 'fundamentalism.'[15] Rather, the present work begins by examining the influence of these concepts in different spheres of pastoral activity, which in turn affects the image of the Church community in society.

A brief theological-practical distinction of terms for this paper highlights the following point: fanaticism refers to a series of phenomena that do not necessarily have to be related to the religious sphere. Religious fanaticism represents only one expression of the broader phenomenon. Nevertheless, within the practice of religion itself, and especially within society, fanaticism appears quite frequently in certain contexts.[16] In the case of fundamentalism, however, we are dealing with a typically religious phenomenon. The movement typically refers to movements that seek to preserve and highlight the so-called fundamental religious principles; one of the most notable being the literal interpretation of the Bible.[17] Nevertheless, within concrete pastoral activity that resonates in the public sphere of a given society, the consequences of both phenomena are quite similar, and in many cases identical.

In addition to the practical aspects concerning the influence of fanatical and fundamentalist tendencies on religious life and practice, certain theological and theoretical elements should also be considered. Practical and theoretical aspects are always interconnected and intertwined, although they are distinguished here for analytical purposes. Some authors emphasize that fundamentalist tendencies are not only an obstacle to true religion, but that they may even represent a bigger challenge for religion than atheism. Moreover, such tendencies can be described as a variety of religious atheism. In this sense, considering the depth of the consequences associated with this problem, Ilia Delio aptly notes that:

> The greatest obstacle to religion today does not come so much from atheists but from the neo-foundationalists whose fundamental tenets of religion claim ontological certainty. These are the religious fundamentalists whose certainty of divine truths based on the inerrancy of scripture creates division. Their grip on God strips the world of the divine mystery. The only way to overcome this (paradoxical) religious atheism is to let go of God.[18]

Fanatic and fundamentalist tendencies are most often manifested through attempts to standardize religious practice of only a limited number of claims, attitudes, or truths. In the Christian context, this frequently takes the form of insisting exclusively on selectively interpreted passages from the Holy Scriptures or on particular elements of church doctrine, while disregarding others. In addition, such tendencies are often accompanied by a strong emphasis on the authority of a group leader, as well as by manipulative or sectarian patterns of behavior and a radical opposition to all

15 See more about the content of the terms and the difference in the meaning of the terms 'fanaticism' and 'fundamentalism' in: Tamayo 1999, 345–347; Vorgrimler 2004, 277., 296–297.

16 Cortés Martinés 1999, 334–336.

17 Vorgrimler 2004, 290–297.

18 Delio 2013, 62.

"dissidents", both in religious and secular circles.[19] Attitudes of this kind have harmful consequences not only on the pastoral activity itself but also for its relationship with society and culture. The quality of this relationship and the future of pastoral activity, will therefore depend to a large extent on the way in which these tendencies are addressed and critically engaged.

14.5 Secular exploitation of the elements of pastoral practice

The final example of challenging elements of pastoral activity concerning representation of religion in society is the issue of the secular exploitation of certain elements of pastoral practice. This question is originally related to the broader problem of exploiting the Holy for secular purposes. Although this problem has specific historical and philosophical roots, it will be discussed here only in a limited sense.[20] In principle, the Holy, as understood in the Christian tradition, is inextricably woven into the pastoral activity itself as its essential matrix. Thus, any attempt to use pastoral practice for secular purposes therefore represents in some way, a misunderstanding and exploitation of the Holy. Such a misunderstanding of the Christian concept of the Holy directly leads to distortions in pastoral practice, particularly when some of its elements are instrumentalized for secular aims.

The secular exploitation of pastoral reality is most often connected with the influence of political power. Besides political factors, certain other economic-social or cultural groups can also play a role in this process; however their influence is usually linked to certain centers of political influence. This is understandable when one considers that various actors of political and socio-cultural life no longer perceive religion in its original religious role within society.[21] In the post-modern context, religion in general, and with it Christian religious practice, is most often understood merely as one factor of social coexistence, whose influence is limited and primarily interpreted through the lens of purely immanent reflection. This is one of the key reasons why prominent actors of the socio-political life sometimes attempt to instrumentalize elements of Christian practice, to connect them with their own elements of action and influence.

Among the various elements of pastoral-liturgical practice that are more often used for secular purposes is the proclamation and explanation of God's word. In this regard, abuse of the homiletic services by individual ordained ministers in the Church for political or other secular purposes is particularly noteworthy. Although cases of this nature are often associated with right-wing figures, similar tendencies can also be observed in some contexts with more left-liberal figures.[22] However, the abuse of

19 Vranješ/Selektović 2021, 91.
20 Kovačević 2021, 177–182.
21 Lob-Hüdepohl 2015–2017, 45–47., 53–62.
22 Lob-Hüdepohl 2015–2017, 52–55.

the homiletic service in the Church is certainly not the only form of misuse related to the proclamation and interpretation of God's word. Certain Christian gatherings, public manifestations, as well as forms of activity on social networks and other public platforms of communication, often reflect forms of exploiting the preaching of the Word of God for pragmatic-cultural or political purposes.

Political and social influences are by no means the only causes of the misuse of the elements of the proclamation of God's word for secular purposes. Namely, many subjects of pastoral activity can be susceptible to such temptations for various reasons. Recently, examples of this have become visible in numerous forms of Christian engagement on social media. In many cases, priests as well as lay believers adopt an 'influencer-style' logic in their online presence, turning their activity into forms of communication that closely resemble secular modes of influencing their followers and shaping the public opinion. Despite many positive examples of proclaiming the Christian message through social media, these forms of presence often distort the message by turning it into a struggle for visibility or gaining as many followers as possible.[23] Proclamation thus becomes a sensationalist form of performance that can easily take on political overtones. This dynamic was visible, for example, during the recent presidential election campaign in the United States. Of course, these cases are not limited to that particular context.

Attempts to exploit pastoral activity for political purposes in the sphere of the preaching of the Word are closely related to similar attempts to exploit some liturgical celebrations, as well as non-liturgical gatherings of the Christian community. Such attempts are understandable if one considers that gatherings of communities often represent opportunities for political and social actors to expand their influence and gain new supporters.[24] In this way, a kind of practical pastoral paradox emerges, in which the sphere of the most specific religious expression becomes a sphere where religion may be exploited for political purposes. Although this problem appears to be decreasing in most European pastoral-cultural contexts, it remains quite pronounced in some regions, especially Eastern European contexts. In any case, this issue will remain an area of continuing discernment and ongoing questioning of the boundaries between connecting the typically pastoral and the typically socio-cultural.

14.6 Conclusion

This work addresses several major challenges concerning the relationship between pastoral practice and contemporary society and culture. These challenges also concern pastoral theology as a scientific theological discipline, which is called in a particular way to promote the continual renewal and improvement of pastoral practice in ever-changing circumstances. One of the most visible problems identified in the analysis is the presence of inadequate forms of preaching and witnessing to the Chris-

23 Fabris 2019, 56–57.

24 Gmainer-Pranzl 2015–2017, 66.

tian message. Another important area that emerges in this regard is the relationship to scientific and technological progress. While it is important to recognize certain negative aspects accompanying such progress, it is equally important to cultivate and sustain a dialogical and constructive attitude toward it.

Closely related to the first two areas, the third chapter examines the influence of fanaticism and fundamentalism on pastoral activity. These negative phenomena – manifested in various forms – are becoming increasingly evident in certain pastoral and social contexts. As a result, both pastoral theology and pastoral practice will need to investigate and evaluate these tendencies with greater intensity. The fourth issue analysed in the work concerns the secular exploitation of pastoral practice. Such forms of misuse most often involve the instrumentalization of liturgical elements or other communal gatherings for political or quasi-political purposes. Taken together, all these challenges must be understood as an ongoing field of discernment and as a call to serious theological-practical engagement aimed at enhancing both theoretical reflection and pastoral practice. The essential pastoral goal remains the establishment of a mature and constructive relationship between pastoral care and contemporary culture.

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