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The Social Doctrine and Presence of the Catholic Church in the Media

Abstract

The social doctrine of the Church involves greater commitment and engagement of the Church in social problems as well as the promotion of relationships that serve justice and peace. The Catholic Church first began relating mass media to its social teaching in the 19th century. As the Church aimed at a broader scope of public, it dealt with means of social communication and examined it through numerous sources – papal encyclicals, conciliar and episcopal documents. The relationship between the Catholic Church and the media is not simple. Approaches to ethics, morality, responsibility and dignity of human beings are sometimes different in media reports and in the aims of the Church in its social doctrine which should provide all members of the society with a sense of direction and instruction for everyday actions. Through the documents presented here, the Church has shown a readiness to face the media as well as the possibility to use them for advancing justice, truth, peace and freedom.

Key words: *social doctrine of the Church, papal encyclicals, means of social communication, Catholic Church and the media.*

Introduction

The social doctrine of the Church, i.e. its social teaching, includes a set of teachings on man and society. It is rooted in the Bible, the Old and New Testament, the teachings of the Church Fathers, in the theological and philosophical discussions by medieval religious teachers and contemporary theologians. Although occasionally expressed in papal bulls and other documents dating to the period before the Industrial Revolution, its occurrence became more systematic in the 19th century. Its sources are numerous: papal encyclicals, conciliar and episcopal documents all stress the importance of human agency and contribution to building relationships in society in order to bridge regional, national and international differences and conflicts thus serving justice and peace. In order to share and spread the message of Christianity, the Church also makes use of media as they have the ability to reach not only individuals, but groups of people and the society as a whole, influencing them through various communication channels. The relationship between the Catholic Church and new media is not quite simple. In accordance with relevant Church documents, communication by the Church must always follow the truth as this constitutes the precondition of freedom and true unity. On the other hand, the issue of value and ethics in the media is complicated. In the words of Adriano Zannacchi, the relationship the media has towards ethics, values and responsibility is “disoriented”⁴⁹, or as Anton Šuljić put it, “far from a truly ethical direction”⁵⁰. Since the Church carries great importance in advocating for the society and addressing crucial social issues, while the media hold an important role in recognizing problems and solutions, we aim to examine how and to what extent the Church is represented in the media today. We also analyse possibilities and obstacles in the relationship between the Church and the media as they represent two actors with great importance for public and social life in general.

Development of Catholic social teaching

Three themes are visible in the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. One is titled “fighting modernism”⁵¹. It represents a crisis of the Church as its theology cannot easily face ideas and social movements influenced by the Enlightenment or the dynamic development of science. On the other hand, there are oppositions to rationalism and liberalism as well as efforts to restore Catholic theology. The second topic relates to systematic attempts at development and Catholic teachings on the life of workers in an increasingly industrialized society, as well as the relation between labour and monetary and human capital. In other words, this is a “social issue” starting with Pope Leo XIII and his encyclical “*Rerum Novarum*”. In it the Pope and the Catholic Church provide a clear commitment and readiness to respond to and engage in new social challenges which have emerged

49 Adriano Zannacchi, “The media have the greatest influence on culture and values today”, <http://www.dan-medija.net>, accessed: 15th January 2020

50 Anton Šuljić, “Media-related (self-)presentation of the Church in Croatia”, *Riječki teološki časopis* 18 (2/2010), pp. 495-510

51 Nediljko A. Ančić, Church and modernism, *Crkva u svijetu* 42 (4/ 2007), pp. 563-566

due to conflicts between capital and labour. In addition to taking a clear and decisive stance, this encyclical for the first time lists principles and criteria for addressing crucial social issues. The third topic deals with means of social communication. It seems this subject first gained prominence in the 1936 encyclical by Pope Pio X titled “Vigilanti cura” which addressed a new type of media specifically – the cinema. On the other hand, a similar subject was later also addressed in the 1957 encyclical by Pope Pio XII titled “Miranda prorsus” alongside widening the scope of interest to the effect and dissemination of news through radio and television. This then led to a separate document of the Second Vatican Council, the pastoral decree “Inter mirifica” and the instruction “Communio et progressio” which encompassed the issue of all means of social communication⁵². Regarding topics of Catholic social teaching, the stated principles and criteria developed further in the hundred-year period after the encyclical “Rerum Novarum”. The most important ones include: (1) personal dignity ensures that man as a worker cannot be equated with goods which are subject to the law of supply and demand, (2) economy cannot be separate from morality and this includes the requirement of justice and love, (3) the Church has the right and duty to interfere in social issues as this is not only a technical matter but always gains an ethical and religious dimension (4) socialism and liberal capitalism in the economic sense do not represent an authentic remedy for social issues, (5) the state as a community striving for the common good has the right and duty to interfere in social issues through laws, thus guaranteeing workers and their families with equal conditions for gaining their livelihoods, quality of life and social security, (6) the suspension of professional associations must not leave workers exposed to the autocracy of business owners that reduce them to a “slave status”, they have a right of association for the protection of their rights, while rejecting class struggle and violent actions.⁵³

In other words, the Church has defined its view on ideas and policies which are contrary to the Christian concept of human dignity, family life and meaning of life within the society and community. The Church holds its position and warns of dangers and misconceptions, supports positive efforts and contributes to addressing difficult social issues, in accordance with its mission.

Development of the Church social doctrine following the encyclical *Rerum novarum*

After the publishing of “Rerum novarum”, the Church went through dynamic developments due to changing social circumstances and new cultural, scientific and theological achievements.

We must first mention the encyclical by Pope Pio XI, “Quadragesimo anno”. This encyclical was published in 1931, during the Great Depression, in circumstances of possible great unrest and fear of unemployment, poverty, destruction of democracy and emergence of dictatorships. For these

⁵² Josip Antolović, Pastoral instruction “Communio et progressio”, *Obnovljeni život* 4 (4/1979), pp. 393-402

⁵³ G. Matrai, Social doctrine of the Church, *Encyclopaedia. Dictionary of Theology*, Kršćanska sadašnjost Zagreb, 2009, p. 1070.

reasons, the encyclical strongly condemns communism and socialism, calls for establishing an alliance between labour and capital, with workers keeping a share in the profits, as well as state intervention in suppressing greed and promoting justice. One of the most important principles in this encyclical is the principle of subsidiarity: major owners and central government cannot assume roles which might successfully be fulfilled by contractors, small businesses and local authorities. In 1961 Pope John XXIII issued the encyclical "Mater et magistra". The early 1960s, when this encyclical was written, were a period of dynamic developments in all sciences and technological progress in various countries across the world, but also a period of social and racial unrest, a widening divide between the rich and the poor. Poor countries fell victim to the Cold War. The social doctrine of the Church is strongly "internationalized" through the encyclical and rich countries are invited to help the development of poor ones, while respecting their culture, specificities and authenticity. Pope John XXIII then issued another encyclical, "Pacem in terris". In accordance with its title, the encyclical calls for establishing and building peace and peaceful coexistence according to the principles of truth, justice, love and freedom. The teaching of John XXIII was summarized at the Second Vatican Council in the pastoral constitution "Gaudium et spes". Following the Council, Pope Paul VI established new foundations for Catholic social teaching in 1967, with the encyclical "Populorum progressio". Development is equated with the concept of peace, seeing all human development as a theological and moral imperative that must serve the attainment of peace. "Octogesima adveniens" was issued in 1971 and warned about the increasing numbers of poor, unemployed and homeless people. This encyclical served as a "call" to all believers and Christians to fight cruel injustices with the help of guidelines and principles which can be found in the social doctrine of the Church. Pope John Paul II issued the encyclical "Laborem exercens" strongly criticizing Marxism and capitalism as well as the treatment of workers as merely means of production. He stressed material conditions such as the right of the workers to wages ensuring dignity and social security, but also the subjective and spiritual values of labour as basic preconditions for providing human beings with a sense of fulfilment. This was followed by the 1987 encyclical "Sollicitudo rei socialis", which commented on the conflict between the liberal capitalism of the West and communism of the East as well as the exploitation of workers being the main obstacle to progress in the world's poorest regions. This was followed by the encyclical celebrating the hundredth anniversary of "Rerum novarum" in 1991 and symbolically marking the end of the communist regime in Europe. The encyclical criticized communism less for its economic failure and more for the fact it eroded basic human rights and human dignity. Responsibility is expected in free market and respect and protection of human dignity is requested as the foundation of every person and every successful economic activity.

In addition to these encyclicals, other documents important for the development of Catholic social teaching include views by bishop committees, synods and conferences such as conferences at Medellin and Puebla.⁵⁴ In the following period the social doctrine of the Church developed

⁵⁴ Stjepan Baloban, The church of the poor: Pope John XXIII to Pope Francis, *Bogoslovska smotra* 84 (3/2014), pp. 479-503

increasingly in accordance with principles of the inductive method, openness to common sense, dialogue, cooperation between the Church and laymen and collaboration with the humanities. Such a position believes in the possibility for greater realization of principles and standards held by the Catholic Church in practice.

The development of Catholic social teaching through all these encyclicals and other documents certainly points to the conclusion that it was not created as an ideology or a “third way” but as an organically developed social system and anthropology which sees in every man the image of God (Imago Dei), and therefore the human being as the “way of the Church”.

The attitude towards the media in modern society in documents of the Second Vatican Council and *Communio et progressio* decree

The Second Vatican Council discussed media in its “Decree on the Means of Social Communication”. This decree was drafted with keeping in mind the growing importance of new means of communication. “Among the astonishing inventions of technological skill which, aided by God, the human mind developed from created things, Mother Church sees and follows with special care those that primarily relate to the field of human spirit”.⁵⁵ This text comprises two passages in 22 chapters with final notes. These state that the media differ in their nature but they all share the power to influence people. The main problem in modern society is that people often take information and content issued by the media “for granted”, without critically analysing the content. Certainly, the media shape public opinion and are necessary for ensuring the right of every individual and society to truthful information. Their importance is illustrated by the claim that all Christian believers should financially support the means of social communication. As receivers of information, readers, listeners and viewers, all Christian believers must follow a moral code, be responsible towards themselves and the young, which is also true for those directly or indirectly creating media messages⁵⁶. In general, this Council document primarily discusses positive opportunities offered by the numerous new and easy ways to communicate, both in order to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel as well as to promote the successful progress of the human race in general. This document also suggests organizing one “Media Day” in dioceses every year. The Church therefore does not shy away from the media, but rather wishes to participate and be part of the media that report and shape public opinion. This is also made clear in the statement that the Church could “carry out its mission more successfully” through the media.

This was followed by the Holy See’s pastoral instruction on means of social communication, dated 23 May 1971, “*Communio et progressio*”. This document interprets more directly the main tenets of “*Inter mirifica*” and promotes the examination of theological and moral dimensions of the means of social communication, encouraging Christians to be more active in building and improving media

⁵⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Documents*, VII. revised and expanded edition, Kršćanska sadašnjost, Zagreb, 2008

⁵⁶ Ibid.

information and reporting. The decree “*Communio et progressio*” issued by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications contains particular instructions for implementing ideas stated in the council document. This decree also has a new focus since by the time it was issued, numerous technical innovations took place as well as the development of all means of social communication. Important messages of this decree include the statement that the purpose of the means of social communication is “increasing attachment and connection among people”, that everyone disseminating information must possess Christian virtues such as “good intent, meaning and responsibility for the common good, docility to Holy Spirit and guidance of the Church, objectivity, respect for the human person and other people’s opinion, truthfulness and ability to be critical of oneself and one’s views.”⁵⁷

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church clearly states that the rights and obligations of the Church include developing its own social teaching to influence the society and its structures through responsibilities and tasks envisaged by this teaching. In this sense the Church should be the teacher of truth, morality, human nature and the gospels. However, participation and disseminating information is impossible if there is no real pluralism in social life or recognition of the various forms and means of communication and information. The compendium therefore notes: “The means of social communication must be used for building and supporting the human community in diverse sectors – economic, political, cultural, educational and religious”⁵⁸. Any type of reporting and communication must serve the common good and contribute to spiritual maturity, openness, dignity and responsibility of every person.

The means of social communication contain a noble goal – reporting and drawing attention to humanity’s problems in order to solve them as quickly as possible and thus unite everyone. This is the basic principle owing to which the Church respects the wide possibilities offered by the means for the “wellbeing of humanity”. We must all be responsible towards the media – whether we are listening, watching, reading or creating media content. The higher the influence of a “communicator”, the higher the social responsibility it carries. All types of reporting need to start from moral values as true freedom is in the ability to choose goodness and report for the “common good”. Although the use of media and its reporting sometimes have “unintended consequences”, people are those who decide whether they will use media in one way or another, for “good” or “evil”. Reporting requires disseminating responsible and true information that need to take the side of the weak and the powerless, the oppressed, sick and marginalized groups, without using this approach for ideological purposes.⁵⁹ What distinguishes new media from the “traditional” ones is that new media have a more active audience which also intervenes in the communication process. Users are no longer merely receivers of media content, they also actively create and produce it. This increases even further the social responsibility of each individual. Communication by the Church and the relationship of the

57 Ibid.

58 Pontifical Commission “*Iustitia et Pax*”, Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church, Kršćanska sadašnjost, Zagreb 2005

59 Jerko Valković, The Church and the modern public: challenges and possibilities for action, *Riječki teološki časopis* 18 (2/2010), pp. 413-532

Church in modern society with new technologies and media is always dramatic, challenging and unpredictable.⁶⁰ However, the role of the Catholic Church is still in place. It promotes material and human rights, protects the family, advocates for poor and marginalized groups, emphasizes the importance of truth and responsibility we have for one another and to the wider community.

Church in the media – challenges and possibilities for their relationship in the future

The media are institutions fulfilling the need for communication which includes participation of all members in a society. The basic characteristics of the media are the production and distribution of content, relationships among people, activities in the public sphere and shaping public opinion. These are always in some relation to the state and government. Modern media reporting however is also characterized by its focus on “transient” and sensationalist topics and news.⁶¹ On the other hand, the Church focuses on universal and eternal values and questions. Due to their very nature, the sustainable relation between them is questionable since, as stated by Šuljić, “media products are marginal in terms of communicating Christian content” and the Church or Christian message “deals with important and permanent things”.⁶² The type of communication is also different regarding the relationship between the one sending and receiving a particular message or content. The Church focuses on every individual, while the media message is not as direct and is therefore more subject to manipulation. But to what extent is the Church present in the media today? Since the beginning of democracy, several Church media ensuring the public presence of the Church have been initiated and their relationship has been regulated through agreements between the Croatian Bishops’ Conference and Croatian Radio-television. Prominent media containing Christian information are primarily Church media: Information Catholic Agency, Croatian Catholic Radio, the Press Office of the Croatian Conference of Bishops, Radio Marija, the magazines *Živo vrelo* and *Glas koncila*. These media contribute to the serious approach in Church activities⁶³. There is however the sense of declining interest for the Church participating in public shows and secular media, especially in commercial television which has never shown much interest in its representation. On the other hand, regardless of the media listed and other examples not mentioned here, the Church is currently best covered in the press, which holds less importance than new media.⁶⁴ The Church still lacks presence on digital platforms and internet portals or social networks. On the other hand, in addition

60 Jerko Valković, Evangelism in the era of media: communication opportunities and issues, *Bogoslovska smotra* 81 (3/2011), pp. 675-696

61 Robert Bogešić, Church and media – evangelism or manipulation, *Kairos: Evandeoski teološki časopis* 13 (1/2019), pp. 97-109

62 Anton Šuljić, Media-related (self-)presentation of the Church in Croatia, *Riječki teološki časopis* 18 (2/2010), pp. 495-510

63 Juraj Mirko Mataušić, The media in a crisis of values, *Bogoslovska smotra* 71 (2/2011), pp. 361-379

64 Anton Šuljić, Media-related (self-)presentation of the Church in Croatia, *Riječki teološki časopis* 18 (2/2010), pp. 495-510

to using new technologies and media, the Church and its followers as members of the society must strengthen and encourage interest of the media for reporting, through their moral authority and participation in scientific, cultural and social life. It is generally the media that ensure participation for all segments of the society, i.e. the media serve as a stage for attracting and combining all parts of the society into one whole. Another problem in the public visibility of the Church through the media is the fact that media content usually includes politics, sports, entertainment and leisure. A selection of such news and information does not leave much room for religious topics. On the one hand it is wrong to see these as merely “religious topics” since openness of the Church towards society does not mean only religious but also general and social topics which would be interesting and important to a wider range of public. On the other hand since these topics are seen only as “religious”, there is no way to further explore and understand the importance of the message spread by the Church.⁶⁵ The Church and the media need to have a critical stance in relation to their own activities and need to examine new forms of dialogue, cooperation and communication. Some of the themes which began in a Church environment have found their way to the general public, such as the matter of peace, justice, ecumenism and the fight against poverty, which is not just a matter of individuals but the society as a whole, at the global level. The power of the Church lies not only in the fact it is “Catholic”, but in the ability to be linked horizontally and vertically.⁶⁶ Horizontal links are possible because the Church is present among many nations and cultures, while vertical linking is possible through collaborations at the level of particular parishes all the way up to governmental institutions at the local, regional, state, international and global level. Catholic social teaching is not and must not be closed off or hidden, it involves active participation and communication with the general public. By the same token, the Church must develop a two-way communication which means that attention and communication are not guided solely on the basis of reacting to a particular event but issues are broached and answers sought which might prove necessary and important for dialogue in a society. The relationship between the Church and media is summarized by Gaitano⁶⁷ as follows: the media act in a sensationalist fashion and are oriented towards short-term news. The Church on the other hand deals with universal values and topics of a centuries-old tradition. In addition to this, evangelism calls for personal change and self-examination, something that is impossible in media reporting.

Despite all the differences however, Pope John Paul II invited the Church to freely use all the “fascinating inventions” given to us by our creator. Extraordinary possibilities of new technologies and media are also recognized by Pope Benedict XVI who called all Christians to “join the network of relationships provided by the digital era, with trust as well as conscious and responsible

65 Jerko Valković, Evangelism in the media era: communication opportunities and issues, *Bogoslovska smotra* 81(3/2011), pp. 675-696

66 Jerko Valković, The Church and the modern public: challenges and possibilities for action, *Riječki teološki časopis* 18 (2/2010), pp. 413-532

67 N.G. Gaitano, Opinione pubblica e Chiesa Cattolica, in Jose Maria la Porte (ed.), *Ontroduzione alla comunicazione istituzionalen della Chiesa*, pp. 77-81

creativity... because this network is also part of human life”.⁶⁸ The Church then clearly understands the importance of communication and using media for discussions on burning social and religious issues. This also means the Church, in addition to its own media, whose existence has already been established, must act in secular media as well in order to ensure its presence in the general public view. The Church must actively and continuously communicate to the general public in order to act through the media in accordance with its mission serving peace, justice, truth, responsibility and respect for the dignity of every human being.

In conclusion

The development of media and technology brings greater challenges and new dilemmas regarding the spread of fake news, unethical behaviour towards individuals and groups, disregard for the privacy and dignity of human beings. This is why it is more important than ever for the Church to actively communicate not only through its own, but through secular media as well and to spread its message to the general public and society. The need for communication with the public and media is shown through efforts in documents of the Church social doctrine recognizing the importance of this type of communication. The nature of the media is not completely complementary to the nature of the Church. Both the Church and the media need to find new ways of communication, dialogue and cooperation, helping one another in disseminating information since the media have great power in shaping public opinion. In other words, the Church needs to warn of certain dangers and misconceptions in modern media reporting, confirm positive efforts and contribute to solving serious social issues, in accordance with its mission.

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⁶⁸ Božo Skoko and Valentina Gusić, New media in the service of evangelism and parish community life – uses in parishes of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Zagreb, *Nova prisutnost* 11 (2013), pp. 193-214

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Socijalni nauk Katoličke crkve i njegov odnos prema medijima

Sažetak

Kao teološko-filozofsko promišljanje o čovjeku i njegovu životu u društvu, socijalni nauk Crkve proizlazi iz papinskih, biskupskih i koncilskih dokumenata. Stoga su glavne teme socijalnog nauka Crkve ljudska osoba, društvena solidarnost i supsidijarnost. U tom nauku, a u svjetlu kršćanskog poimanja ljudske osobe te načela solidarnosti i subsidijarnosti, nude se kršćanski odgovori na neka teška i zamršena pitanja, među kojima se, već više od stotinu godina, ističe tzv. socijalno pitanje, a od druge polovine 20. stoljeća i pitanje uloga koje imaju sredstva društvene komunikacije, mass media. U ovom članku se pokazuje kako odnos Katoličke crkve i medija nije jednostavan: kako se taj nauk izrazio u doba „borbe protiv modernizma“, kako nakon pojave industrijske revolucije, a kako u 'informacijsko doba' koje još traje. Može se vidjeti da je pristup etici, moralu, odgovornosti i dostojanstvu ljudske osobe u mainstream medijskom prostoru često oprečno različit od odgovora koje nudi Crkva. Da mediji informaciju u tom prostoru samo ne prenose, nego da ga i stvaraju. Za Crkvu, gledajući njezin socijalni nauk koji bi trebao služiti svim članovima društva kao orijentir i uputa za svakodnevno djelovanje, važno je istinito i cjelovito prenošenje informacija. Kroz ovdje pobrojane dokumente može se vidjeti da Crkva pokazuje spremnost na suočavanje s medijskim izazovima, jednako kao i za mogućnost njihova korištenja u promicanju socijalne pravde, istine, mira i slobode u traženju zajedničkog dobra.

Ključne riječi: *socijalni nauk Crkve, papinske enciklike, sredstva društvenog priopćavanja, odnos Katoličke crkve i medija.*



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