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POPULAR PIETY

Its Manifestations and Influence upon the Spiritual Development of the Faithful

In this paper I wish to consider – taking the Church in Poland as an example – how popular piety contributes to spiritual development of the faithful. Let me start with referring to the experience of the Church in the United States. Some time ago, in answer to the Synod of Bishops' inquiry, bp James Malone, president of the USA Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote: "In our Church we confront an emptiness that is caused by disappearance of popular piety".

Disappearance of popular piety?

We know that this situation has resulted from the fact that the reception of the liturgical reforms of Vatican II has not been sufficiently deepened. This concerns especially the prescriptions in Articles 21 and 34 of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, relating to the introduction of native tongues into the liturgy and of necessary purifications and simplifications into the liturgical rites. "The rites should be distinguished by a noble simplicity; they should be short, clear (...); they should be within the people's powers of comprehension" (ibid., 34).

In the spare space that appeared as a result of the vanishing of traditional forms of piety, long known also in the USA, we could soon observe development of devotions formed by uncontrolled emotions. Combined with increasing religious ignorance, this phenomenon became nourishment for numerous sects coming into existence. It also brought about a deep crisis of faith and a crisis of priestly and religious vocations; it was also one of major factors underlying disruption of family, the invasion of drug taking, pornography and other threats, which the provinces of the Church that had been in bloom so far were not able to resist.

Poland is a place where the Church, at least as seen from far, has long been an oasis of power and stability. She has survived a long and

hard time of ordeal and persecution. She has been verified, then. She has brought forth great men of the Church, so she has been truly vital and evangelical. To say the truth, however, it is just because of the dominance of popular piety in the Church in Poland that in many countries the Polish model is suspected to be superficial – but this only makes our question keener: What is the truth about popular piety? What does it give to the Catholicism in Poland? Is it its power or weakness? What are the manifestations of popular piety in Poland?

The main task: to communicate faith

Before we go into details, let us look at the outlined problem in a wider context – in the context of the Catholic Church and the changes observed in her at so unusual a turning of history. All of us – whether in Poland, in Europe or the USA – concentrate on the same: on our responsibility for communicating faith to the coming generations in the ever fast changing conditions of the world.

We aim at putting into practice our Lord's testament from the Cenacle, the testament on mutual love. This is possible only due to our participation in the Paschal Mystery of Christ given in the Eucharist. Here we should say with great emphasis: Christ has risen and He is with us. And this is why it is a delight, as one of the Popes used to say, to travel in a boat that has a hole and to be sure it will not drown – but we should be aware that we must not stop rowing.

This is always the point. We should keep defining and modernising the rowing – but, first of all, keep rowing. With all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength. The rowing consists in constantly forming vivid consciousness of the Church, God's people – bishops, priests and the faithful. It is necessary that, aware of the goal towards which they are sailing, all take the oars in their hands. Moreover: that they row with the power of the risen Christ, conscious of His presence in the boat driven by His wisdom and the power of His love, but also taking up the common responsibility for the voyage to ever new regions of the world, to ever new generations. "Priests must work on deepening in the faithful their awareness of the great truths of our faith and on improving their belief. We would behave as ostriches, were we to ignore the fact that many of our faithful have weak faith. They have little hold upon truths that are central in the Christian message and cling to what is peripheral. It is often that they have not been given a presentation of the Christian truth other than diminished or distorted" (Ch. Davies).

True piety draws on the Bible and the Liturgy

Here we touch our main subject again. Speaking of popular devotions we should keep well in mind also the fact that, after all, the emphasis is on the basic element of the subject: the spiritual development of faithful. So treating on popular piety as a pastoral problem, we ought to add immediately that we mean its influence upon genuine Christian spiritual life, which is based on the Bible, liturgy and true mysticism – according to the famous sentence of Pius Parsch: “I have made three discoveries in my life: the first was the Bible, the second was Liturgy and the third – their mutual relationship”. Thus, the Bible is the Book on the history of salvation, Liturgy is the source of God’s life in us, and mysticism is penetration of the man free from sin by the holiness of Triune God. (Here pay special attention: Communion without confession – a custom more and more frequently met in the West – leads Christian life in Christ’s disciple straight to ruin).

Let us come to more precise considerations now and start with the teaching of the Church. The Vatican Council II does not say much on this subject. The main text about popular piety (*pia populi christiani exercitia, piété populaire, Volksfrömmigkeit*) – in which it is *valde commendatur* – is article 13 of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. We read here: “Popular devotions of the Christian people are warmly commended, provided they accord with the laws and norms of the Church. Such is especially the case with devotions called for by the Apostolic See. Devotions proper to individual churches also have a special dignity if they are conducted by mandate of the bishops in accord with customs or books lawfully approved. Nevertheless these devotions should be so drawn up that they harmonise with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some fashion derived from it, and lead the people to it, since the liturgy by its very nature far surpasses any of them”

Popular piety as a chance for evangelisation

How has this prescription been applied in everyday life of the Church? Let us mention the positive first. In order that traditional devotions might be maintained and their practice might be interpreted in the spirit of the Vatican Council, dioceses prepared parochial agendas and manuals for devotions, namely: May Devotion to Our Lady, June Devotion to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Rosary Devotion in October, Litanies and the Vespers. The matter of the periodical devotions which were formed on the basis of the liturgical year was elaborated by including readings from the Bible in their

course. Prayerbooks read to the people were replaced by biblical texts; also more acclamations and more Psalm singing was introduced.

However, beside these also unfavourable phenomena began to appear: religious pop songs included in the celebrated liturgy and increase of quantitative valuation – one based on the number of meetings or seeking measurable success. At the same time this led to reduction of the basic Christian practices, such as meditation or adoration. Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament also vanished. It is a pity that this practice was not made more vivid by being deepened. Although it was rightly admitted that the Holy Mass is the summit of Christian life, it practically ceased to be a summit: since a summit needs lower levels to be a completion of.

After thirty years, as a matter of fact, the situation has approached this description which shows the advantages and the drawbacks. What still dominates is a pyramidal model of the Church (and, therefore, also of the activity in the Church – that is the descending direction, from the hierarchy to the people – but there are already clear signs of laity-inspired action. It issues, however, from either a well formed popular piety or its degenerate image. This is why it either builds the Church or destroys her. In this “either-or” we can easily see the “to-be-or-not-to-be”!

Let us look at this problem taking liberation theology as an example. In Latin America liberation theology assumed as its basis piety popular but understood in a particular way. It spread first of all in the masses, penetrating both the masses and their culture (or sub-culture) – in which popular religion is included – but it joined its message with political activity. It opposed not only the structures of formal and bureaucratic Catholicism, but also the Church hierarchy, and the rich for the sake of pauperism. However, it is worth noting that there were attempts at giving a proper direction to this dynamic movement. The Synod of Bishops in 1974, which took up the subject: “Evangelisation in the contemporary world”, and opinions pronounced at the Latin American Bishops’ Conference gave liberation theology a good course. Just then an extremely important statement was uttered – that popular piety offered a chance for true evangelisation. The popular mass piety can be a starting-point of deepened activity of the Church. That was the very point of what Paul VI said in his encyclical *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975, article 48) when he used the term *popularis religiositas*.

Splendours and miseries of popular Catholicism

Here, in the enormous mass of people – the Pope reminded – precious riches are hidden, such as hunger after God, readiness to devote

oneself and to undertake magnanimous efforts, to make great, even heroic sacrifices, as far as confession of faith is concerned. One can see that simple people have a keen sense of God's fatherhood, of Providence and of His constant presence. It is in the plain and poor rather than in other people that such values can be found as patience, benefaction, veneration for what is sacred. However, when these virtues do not find a sake worthy of man's engagement, they degenerate, and then the faults of popular piety, destructive to the Church community, emerge: superficial attachment to religious practices, which is little short of magic and superstition, often simplistic understanding of the truths of faith and, as a consequence, susceptibility to the influence of sects and false forms of piety, or not deepened fervid emotionality with an inclination to fanaticism. Crises of faith are due not only to the impact of mass media, but also to the not quite apparent and insufficiently dynamic disposition of the Church to take care of the raw material of popular piety thoroughly.

It is interesting to analyse particular regions of the world in this respect. The development and decadence curve for popular piety is different in France, Spain, Germany or the Netherlands. Historical studies point to interesting evolution within the models of popular piety. At any rate, up till now popular piety in Poland has been of great significance – it is still vivid and dynamic here.

In the whole Church, however, two opposite attitudes are being formed: on the one hand, there is complete tolerance and approval or even propagation of popular forms of devotion created by the people or even prepared and commended by ecclesial institutions: on the other hand, an opposite trend is spreading – neglect or fight against this kind of devotions.

The piety of the simple and the piety of the wise

Let us now proceed to matters of greatest importance: to an attempt at relating popular piety with genuine spirituality. Difficulties in appropriate handling of this problem follow from the complicated and ambiguous form of the phenomenon called popular piety. One should remember this when desiring to show the convergence of Christianity and “common people” or simply the people.

Let us first take note that beside the expression “popular piety” we have terms such as religion of the people, popular religion, popular Christianity, popular Catholicism, popular devotions, popular religious custom, popular religious practices. In these the emphasis is put on the word “popular” (*populaire, popolare, volkstümlich*). How much complicated the problem is can be proved by the fact that another, long used term *paraliturgia* is also explicated as popular liturgy,

Volksliturgie. What is more, every expert in liturgy will notice that even the notion of liturgy – in Greek *leitōn ergon* – means “act of the people”. Given these explanations one may easily arrive at the superficial conclusion that popular piety is in opposition to the official liturgy – although in the Church’s understanding of the essence of liturgy, there has never been a clerical emphasis, for the liturgy is an act of all people, as Christ wanted it to be! If the liturgy ever was clerical in character, this came about only at times when true knowledge of the words and of the reality signed by them got obscure.

Besides, we know that since the beginning Christianity has been associated with plain people. They were the first addressees of Jesus’ preaching and His first disciples (cf Matt 4: 18–25). This is to plain people that Jesus spoke using a language of images, comparisons and parables drawn from their everyday life and experience. St Paul understood this when he wrote: “Now remember what you were, my brothers, when God called you. From the human point of view few of you were wise or powerful or of high social standing. God purposely chose what the world considered nonsense in order to shame the wise, and he chose what the world considers weak in order to shame the powerful” (I Cor 1:26–27).

This was so in the whole history of the Church. *Foi savante* did not always excel *foi populaire*. Has it not been up till the present moment that educated Christians, even theologians – and, moreover, professors of theology, sometimes falsified the faith, “letting all kinds of strange teachings lead them from the right way” (cf. Heb 13:9), “upsetting others and trying to change the gospel of Christ” (cf Gal 1:7)? This happens because besides superstition of plain people we have to do with gnosis of the educated, one of the most dangerous diseases or perversions of Christianity. It consists in detaching rationalised, highly specialist speculative theories from a rudimentary understanding of the Lord’s Testament from the Cenacle. Therefore, the question about the criteria of the authenticity of popular piety appears to be the more important. This question is posed by all Christians, also those living on the Vistula.

*True faith means love for the Person which is expressed
in concrete deeds*

The first criterion is based on an important differentiation introduced by Vatican II. I mean what the Council called ‘hierarchy of truths’ (*Decree on Ecumenism*, 11). There are ‘truths of the aim’ and ‘truths of the way, of the means’. This division was known to St Thomas Aquinas. Among the ‘truths of the aim’ he reckons the Mystery of the Trinity, the Incarnation of God’s Son and, consequently, the ex-

tension of Christ's deeds and teaching in the liturgy of the Church – and, more broadly, in the service of the Church performed by realising His prophetic, priestly and pastoral mission.

Truths of the means are of no less importance, but only because they express the truths of the aim in concrete particulars. St Augustine understood this problem thus when he wrote: "Love – and do what you will". There are numerous truths of the means. But here is the heart of the matter: we know that the object of our faith is not a sum of what is numerous but Unity of definite shape – Living God. To Living God one should say one's complete, all-pervading, radical *amen, fiat*, 'yes'! In this consist true faith in God and its ethical consequences. ("The righteous man will live by faith" – cf. Heb 10:38).

Such is also the fundament of true devotion and its various manifestations. If these lose that oneness, they will bring a man to peripheries. After long ages in which truths were set apart, we tend today to treat them as a whole. Such, for example, is the meaning of a sound devotion to Our Lady: do whatever the Son tells you (cf *St John* 2:5). And the Son says: "I give you a new commandment!" "Do this in memory of me!" "Take this, all of you, and eat it!"

The second criterion of true piety is its character rooted in the Incarnation – Karl Rahner called this unconditional necessity to combine the transcendental and categorial devotion: God in the Trinity of Persons must be loved by means of concrete deeds, the ultimate end can be reached only by making small steps. The crucified love of Christ is the criterion of authenticity of every human love.

When one does not know this, everything is an utopia, illusion, fancy. But also the other way round: particulars, especially the moral rules, commandments and inspirations containing concrete requirements cannot become the rule of life if a man lacks motivation arising from encounter with the Person of Living God Who is near. Only such a comprehensive vision of the whole enlivens people's faith making it more dynamic.

Popular piety and the contemporary man

The question remains how to approach popular piety nowadays. Without doubt, it expresses the innermost longings of a religious man. However, in many cases it also has flaws such as obsolete elements, most often descending from the Baroque or, as in Poland, Romanticism. Thus, the problem arises of seeking and creating new forms of popular piety. This is impossible without clearly realising that the contemporary man's mentality has changed: people are now critical both about antiquated naive ideas and about new arbitrary ones. Therefore the passing away of old forms must coincide with a con-

stant appearance and creation of new ones. Popular piety is always both a new chance and a realm of threats.

The central fact must be above all: that particular forms of popular piety must always be penetrated by genuine Christian spirituality. It is awareness of this fact that in recent years accompanied Polish priests, whose pastoral ministry full of radicalism and sacrifice created spirituality formed on the basis of the Bible and liturgy, besides the existing enormous reservoir of popular devotion. Where it was missing, a crisis came, which always threatens every province of the Church. The more responsibility and care about transforming popular piety bishops, priests and lay people will display, the more stable authenticity of faith there will be.

Popular piety is a complex value. Superficiality may go with profundity here, showy theatricality with an inmost experiencing of the *sacrum*, seeking oneself with seeking God. Fr H. de Lubac said once that it is a temptation of sages to disdain popular piety. Yet, the safeguard of authenticity is neither the domain of wise men nor that of common people; it lies in fidelity to Christ and to the power of His Spirit, Who guides us to the Father on various ways.

What should be our task for the present time is a great rethinking of the content of our faith, rediscovery of Christ present in the Eucharist as the source of general renewal of the life of the Church, who is the Body of Christ. The liturgy must be the centre of the life and pastoral work of the Church: in the liturgy the Spirit flows forth from the risen Christ, and He and we become two in One Spirit.

Conclusions

1. Take care of popular piety that is already in existence and create its new forms.
2. Deepen popular religion by catechises introducing the faithful into the Paschal Mystery of Christ and the Church.
3. Treat popular piety as a foreground of liturgy, especially the Eucharist, which is the source of true morality.
4. In this context we may say: "if we were saltier, the world would be thirstier".

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POBOŻNOŚĆ LUDOWA, JEJ PRZEJAWY I WPŁYW NA DUCHOWY
ROZWÓJ WIERNYCH

Streszczenie

Na przykładzie życia Kościoła w Polsce autor rozważa szanse i zagrożenia, jakie niesie w sobie pobożność ludowa, oraz możliwość wykorzystania jej form dla ewangelizacji i odnowy Kościoła zgodnie z duchem soboru watykańskiego II, który przypomniał prawdę o najwyższej randze liturgii w życiu Kościoła. Kościół w Polsce cechuje przewaga pobożności ludowej, a jednocześnie to, że przetrwał długi okres prób i prześladowań, wydając wielkich ludzi wiary – ale religijność Polaków ocenia się w świecie jako powierzchowną.

Spontaniczna pobożność ludu niesie w sobie pozytywną siłę, z takimi elementami jak głód Boga, wyostrzony zmysł obecności Boga, Jego ojcostwa i Opatrzności, cześć dla *sacrum*, cierpliwość, ofiarność dla spraw wiary. Siłę tej, jeśli nie zostanie otoczona należyłą troską Kościoła, zagraża przerodzenie się w powierzchowne, graniczące z zabobonem przywiązanie do praktyk, w których ludzie szukają siebie samych a nie Boga, uproszczone pojmowanie prawd wiary i żywiołowa uczuciowość ze skłonnością do fanatyzmu, które stanowią o podatności na wpływ sekt czy fałszywych form religijności. Wiele form ludowej pobożności jest obarczonych elementami przestarzałymi.

Postawy wobec pobożności ludowej oscylują pomiędzy tolerancją i aprobatą a pogardą ludzi wykształconych.

Chrześcijaństwo i jego „źródło i szczyt”, liturgia, od początku związane są z prostymi ludźmi – do takich przemawiał Chrystus czy św. Paweł. Kryteria autentycznej pobożności ludowej są takie same, jak i duchowości Kościoła, która jest biblijna i liturgiczna: skupienie na centrum, jakim jest obecność Boga Żywego, Chrystusa, w Eucharystii – sprawdzalne w konkretach życia. W obecności Chrystusa w Eucharystii tkwi niewyczerpalne źródło odnowy Kościoła.

We wnioskach autor postuluje, aby:

1. Otoczyć troską już istniejącą ludową pobożność i tworzyć nową.
2. Pogłębiać religię ludu przez katechezę wprowadzającą w paschalne misterium Chrystusa i Kościoła.
3. Traktować pobożność ludową jako przedpole liturgii i wiązać ją z liturgią, zwłaszcza z Eucharystią, w której jest źródło prawdziwej moralności.