

Addressing fear as a form of diakonia: Public engagement of the church

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Introduction

Recent global crises—financial, migration, and pandemic—have again revealed fear as an important driving agent in politics and society. Churches are particularly challenged in communicating their message of love and solidarity relevantly and credibly in times of distress and anxiety. This chapter is based on recent empirical research; it identifies public engagement of the Academic Parish of Prague as diakonia, a specific exercise of Christian love. By examining parish activities, it explores—above all—what pastoral strategies in addressing fear were adopted within the congregation and towards mainstream society between 2016 and 2019. By reviewing both specific and interchangeable characteristics of this pastoral effort, it outlines differences between parish and chaplaincy ministry and as such advocates for specialization in church pastoral efforts.

In order to handle a theme of fear—either individual or shared—tangibly, I examined two situations during my research period, namely the migration crisis in 2015 and anti-gender initiative in 2017. In both cases, hateful rhetoric was identified as contributing to emotional anxiety both within the church and society at large. For its capacity to address these issues in public media, the parish tried to soothe general distress, which is, I argue, an example of its “ad extra” mission (Mette 2005).

Research and results

For exploration of this social and pastoral phenomenon I chose an interdisciplinary methodology.

While the classic method of observation, evaluation and stimulation provided a practical theological framework (Klein 2005, Fuchs 2001), the grounded theory methodology facilitated the analytical part of the empirical study (Charmaz 2006).

Empirical research was carried out in 2016 when I conducted 11 in-depth interviews with current and former members of the parish, representing various demographic groups. This particular study was embedded within larger research, whose main concern was a religious choice. With a reference to Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (Corbin and Strauss 2008), I followed the structure of an open, axial, and selective coding process to generate a research hypothesis. While a coding paradigm model examined the process of opting for a particular church community, it suggested that people choose the specific parish because it acknowledges their social, spiritual and intellectual capacity and treats them with respect.

These empirical findings were further analyzed and evaluated theologically: having examined four functions of the parish, i. e., martyria, leiturgia, diakonia, and koinonia (Lehner 1994), I eventually identified that diakonia—service to others—is exercised through public engagement in this particular case and constitutes a major appeal for parishioners as well as newcomers. I conceptualized a public activity of the parish as handling with “truth” and “love” for the very specific use of these notions in Czech history and society today (Muchova 2021). In the following theological analysis, therefore, I evaluate how the parish addressed these concepts in its pastoral ministry and propose a possible enhancement in this matter.





Church in public space

The Academic Parish of Prague was identified as a rather vocal player when it comes to political issues. Although officially established as “parish” in 1990, this church community functions rather as a spiritual center, an open platform for Christians and others alike. Its focus on members of academia constitutes its chaplaincy character—i.e., optional and casual membership—without many typical parish characteristics. Despite a somewhat misleading name, I keep the established term.

This parish, unlike other initiatives, such as the pro-life movements, rarely challenges particular legislation; instead, it is more concerned with the ethical coherency of political representatives. This can be characterized as an ethical-philosophical rather than operational-political position of the parish and should be treated as such (Muchova 2021, 144). The parish, established to serve academia, is clear about its liberal and progressive views on many social issues; however, it sees its political mission in promoting dialogue and critical thinking above all. Tomáš Halík claims, for instance, that not as major a difference between conservatives and liberals exists today as between those who are open to dialogue and those who are not (Halík 2021). This claim, which requires more social research, reveals a main direction of the parish, i.e., an emphasis on reason, freedom and responsibility. While it recognizes a lie as a key instrument for various kinds of manipulation, it addresses the issue often.

This concept has a special political connotation in Czech society. With a reference to pre-war Czechoslovak democracy and the motto on the presidential standard, “Truth prevails,” Václav Havel later coined the phrase “Truth and love must prevail over lies and hatred” while re-establishing democracy in 1989. Supporters of Havel and his moral-political standards are sometimes pejoratively called “truth-and-love types” so any reference to this—especially in Halík’s texts and sermons—conveys a clear political statement (Muchova 2021). A deliberate use of critical thinking in social and religious themes—a tool derived from academia—is exercised when it comes to political issues. The language may vary if referring to truth and love through pastoral means, such as sermons, or through communication means, such as public media.

Search for truth

An exploration of how the parish relates to truth in public space is demonstrated through two examples, the migration crisis and the anti-gender initiative, which revealed many individual as well as shared fears within Czech society.

Regarding the first case, I did not receive detailed information on migration from my respondents despite posing a direct question. I assume it reflects a general atmosphere in the country where people did not have personal experience with religious and ethnic diversity, so the arrival of large numbers of refugees from the Middle East disturbed various parts of the society in 2015. Rather than showing rejection most respondents claimed not understanding the phenomenon enough in order to take a clear position. One parishioner reported on being involved in an international humanitarian aid effort in the Balkans, and later providing education at Czech schools; she was very critical of some Church representatives for their alleged passivity and ignorance. All other respondents expressed their inability to identify the problems from their perspective and spoke about the role of the parish and Tomáš Halík’s “activist” sermons with a certain caution.

Halík soon initiated a debate with his “Ten Points to Fear of Islam” article. He emphasized a necessity to solve the problem in Europe together and not let irresponsible nationalists exploit the issue and set the terms of the debate. Having opposed a collective guilt model, Halík challenged particular prejudices and simplifications about Islam in Czech society. His reported goal was not to educate people about Islam and its magnificence, as some later referred to it, but to provide a rational perspective in times where negative emotions seemed to prevail (Halík 2015). Although his text may resemble a defense of Islam in Europe—and as such would qualify for further elaboration and academic examination—Halík claimed his main task was to challenge the basis for panic with objective data.

I noticed two special characteristics in my research: Halík explicitly accused particular politicians of being nationalists who “drive people to the Muslim fundamentalists” with their hateful rhetoric; and he deliberately sided with a vulnerable minority despite facing misunderstanding and criticism from the public. In partnership with other organizations the parish called for solidarity with refugees by organizing a series of public lectures on the topic meant to outline the official position of the

Catholic Church locally and internationally, to emphasize a biblical message of solidarity, and to propose possible ways for handling personal concerns.¹ A benefit of the parish, therefore, cannot be seen in providing practical humanitarian help. In accordance with its rational approach its main contribution was in addressing society with challenging and disturbing questions of an ethical nature.

Regarding the second case—the anti-gender initiatives—two conflicts were observed. While in 2017 the Church representatives decided against providing LGBT+ chaplaincy,² the Academic Parish offered them a meeting space. In 2015 the parish supported a discussion with a prominent representative of queer ministry in the Catholic Church.³ My respondent, who did not identify with queer community herself, appreciated the parish for its openness and lack of prejudice. Despite her approval of Catholic ethics on the one hand, and her distaste for the Academic Parish on the other, she actually acknowledged the parish community for avoiding easy black-and-white statements. By its willingness to sponsor the LGBT+ community, the parish sided with the marginalized group whose very existence aroused many negative emotions and fears among believers. Similarly to migration case the parish understood its role here as an agent stimulating rational discussion about the topic, this time specifically in a framework of the Catholic Church.

For some Christians truth represents a doctrinal and theological teaching that requires no further discussion. For the Academic Parish truth seems to represent a constant search—questioning each individual situation specifically and comparing it with the Gospel no matter the official Church position. It is not to confront the Church teaching *a priori* but to negotiate, discover, and eventually receive or reject the outcomes. It enables people to challenge important aspects of their faith and worldview and choose their position—and it actually keeps people active in the search for truth; theologically, in a process of constant conversion. Pastorally, the Academic Parish

seems to side with seekers, people who search for truth but are unable to accept Church teaching for various reasons, i.e., lack of spiritual experience, theological knowledge, or other personal circumstances. Martin Kočí proposes a rationale behind this: “The Church has often forgotten those who pose uncomfortable and provocative questions and has favored solidarity with the ‘poor ones.’ Halík turns the attention of the Church to those who ask disturbing questions and reminds them that they cannot be forgotten either. This is undoubtedly one of the greatest benefits of Halík’s work” (Kočí 2013, 248).

Search for truth is often interpreted theologically, such as the ultimate truth of Jesus Christ (John 14:6), or ethically, such as social justice (CV 6-7) in the Church. The Academic Parish is concerned with truth as it is natural to academia—by applying reason and critical thinking. While respecting experiential truth of its visitors, the parish representatives insist on scientific truth based on evidence; the disciplines would involve philosophy, psychology, sociology, political and communication science in this case. By referring to migration and gender through data-based evidence, for instance, the parish aims to address both Christian and non-Christian audience; it operates with theological truth minimally. The respondents asserted that the parish would enter the public space to ask questions—not provide answers—about truth in politics, media, and particular social situations. Early identification of potential dangers in the public mood, for instance, contributes to a balanced debate about certain issues (Halík 2017).

In a time of disinformation media and truth relativism, a credible witness to truth—whose message was tested through critical thinking and reliable evidence—becomes an invaluable and credible messenger for others. This research shows that Tomáš Halík and the Academic Parish seem to choose solidarity with seekers of truth—both from within and outside of the Church—in their diakonia style.

Diakonia as an exercise of love

Diakonia represents love and charity, the essential Christian attitude to other people. It is grounded in the ministry of Jesus Christ: besides preaching the good news of salvation, Jesus served people by liberating them physically and spiritually (Mark 1:32). The Church inherits this method (Mark 10:43-45) and calls on Christians to follow Jesus also in charity and service to their neighbors. Yet, this calling

1 APP. 2015. <http://www.farnostsalvator.cz/public/salvatore/Salvatore%20123%20listopad%20final.pdf> [11.8.2017]

2 Duka, D. 2017. <http://www.dominikduka.cz/vyjadreni/odpoved-hnuti-logos-cr-a-lgbt-katolikum/> [8.8.2017]

3 Luštinec, V. 2015. https://www.christnet.eu/clanky/5569/akademicka_farnost_praha_se_letos_zapoji_do_programu_praha_pride_duka_pripomina_katechismus.url [20.10.2019]



may have different shapes as people live in different contexts (1 Cor. 12:4-6). No matter what charisma people and communities receive, they are all called to share it with their neighbors and society in order to reveal God's love in the flesh (John 3:16). So, how is diakonia seen in the Academic Parish? Who are the poor in need of help? How specifically does the congregation exercise charity using its charisma and gifts? And, eventually, how is this mission seen by its parishioners: did they associate with a declared vision of the parish or did they find it difficult to follow this approach?

Although some typical charitable activities were observed in the Academic Parish, the main area of diakonia—solidarity with others—was identified in serving truth on a social-political level. This is manifested primarily through its support for truth and justice in media and politics. The parish enters the public space to serve the poor of our times—seekers—who are not addressed by classical pastoral care properly. They may be uncertain about personal issues, confused with existential questions; they may challenge their faith or be disappointed with a certain form of Christianity. While many might be disturbed by social issues, such as globalization, secularization, migration and political instability, the parish tries to address these issues with a respect to integral human development (CV 52).

So, while studying martyrria I observed pastoral means (such as homily and catechesis); in diakonia, the focus is on the mission outside of the Church—a secular society that needs the Gospel message being delivered in a different style than the Church congregation does. Despite the pejorative “truth-and-love” typology in Czech discourse, such a reference to universal concepts of truth and love seems to cope better with the Czech public than other religious language does. A close link between sacral (parish) and social (politics) is represented primarily by Tomáš Halík, the parish priest and public intellectual, through his various texts in mainstream media. Thanks to his numerous publishing activities it is possible for the general public to follow his value system over a long period. In outlining the specific mission, for instance, Halík suggested that the parish wishes to oppose populism, arrogance, demagoguery, conformism and servility.⁴ Sometimes

this is not possible without a conflict: “Christian love for a neighbor is not exercised in sentimentalism and artificial harmonization, but, where necessary, in the struggle for others and in enduring the necessary conflicts” (Rahner and Vorgrimler 1996, 158).

Some acknowledge Halík's civil activism and believe in his contribution to Czech democracy: “Halík is a public intellectual par excellence, he is not afraid of controversies, or political conflicts. He holds clear opinions and does not hesitate to pronounce them, but if important, he does not hesitate to persuade others actively” (Pehe 2008, 254). This differentiates Halík from some of his colleagues from academia and the Church who see public activities as superficial and inappropriate.

Likewise, the respondents appreciated the Academic Parish for being critical of certain social phenomena; they emphasized its ability to challenge political, social and societal injustice as a prophetic voice. This is not only a question for totalitarian regimes; but also democracies need to watch for the rule of law and ethics in public space. Christians, with their sensitivity to truth, may detect a potential danger sooner than the general public and it is their responsibility to act. Halík asserts it is necessary to speak up against cowardice and indifference to evil in public. During the visit of Dalai Lama in 2016, for example, the political representation issued a statement claiming a strategic partnership with China supporting its sovereignty and territorial integrity vis-à-vis Tibet. While this statement may first seem innocuous, further contextualization reveals compelling arguments for taking political action, such as abuse of power, disinformation and hate speech (Muchova 2021, 73–74).

Interestingly, the parishioners did not wish their representatives to explicitly support certain politics or political parties; instead, they expected their involvement in democratic dialogue, stressing more general—ethical—issues, as suggested in *Gaudium et spes*: “To pass moral judgment in those matters which regard public order when the fundamental rights of a person or the salvation of souls require it” (GS 76).

Although many claimed similar political views as those presented in the Academic Parish, not everybody shared them fully claiming they were too naïve and impractical for real politics. Similarly, some church visitors who publicly pronounced their conservative political opinions were repeatedly spotted in the parish. What brings people with an

4 Halík, T. <http://www.farnostsalvator.cz/clanek/2160/vyzva-k-neucasti-na-letosnim-udelovani-statnic-h-vyznamenani#.XR96yugzZPY> [22.10.2016]

opposing worldview to a church where talking politics—at least in indirect and symbolic form—is omnipresent? Is their attraction caused by different motivations, such as high preaching standards, affirming social status, pursuing liturgical beauty, or pragmatically a convenient time of services? And how shall the parish in its specific diakonia way address such an audience? In this research therefore it is important to recognize a diversity of churchgoers—also political—and ask if this can be attributed, for instance, to an atmosphere of dialogue and tolerance that the parish declares as its priority.⁵

Identifying fear

With reference to Christian love, fear seems to be in clear opposition—bringing division, misunderstanding, prejudice, and hatred (Zulehner 2016). The Academic Parish, for instance, claims to support critical thinking on social media content and public meaning even if it implies being a non-conformist minority (Halík 2017). Pope Francis refers to fear among the general population and asserts that being fearful is not a sin as such; it is mostly an inappropriate reaction to fear that is problematic: “The sin is to allow these fears to determine our responses, to limit our choices, to compromise respect and generosity, to feed hostility and rejection” (Francis 2018).

Paul Tillich differentiates between fear as having a definite source and anxiety, without a specific source. Although different, they cannot be separated; they are immanent within each other. He maintains that this is something natural and all humanity shares these concerns (Tillich 2000, 36–39). Sometimes it seems that Christian teaching strives to respond to people’s ontological fear by delineating the message of salvation and eternal life. But is this also responding to particular and concrete fears people have today? Barbara McClure emphasizes the importance of distinguishing fear as life-giving or life-limiting emotion; while fear can be helpful for physical survival, it may be destructive in inaccurate assumptions about others leading to oppression and exclusion, such as in xenophobia (McClure 2019, 178–179). Identifying fear, both in individuals and in a population, and handling it responsibly,

may thus become an important service to fellow citizens.

Peter Neuner and Paul Zulehner outline that Kierkegaard, Drewman, Biser, and Benedict XVI see fear as a source of violence, greed, and lies. It is only healing from fear that makes it possible to become a loving person (Neuner and Zulehner 2015, 48). Question remains how a healing process can be carried pastorally. McClure observes that emotions refer to real human experience, and as such, provide the most important tool for understanding people’s lives in pastoral theology (McClure 2019). By healing people’s particular wounds, Klara Csiszar specifies, the Church can realize its diakonia fully; only then can people discover the meaning of their life. People’s fear and wounds should therefore be the foremost pastoral concern of the Church (Csiszar 2021, 136).

Pope Francis takes a conscious stand; he recognizes fear as a legitimate experience but challenges the negative consequences of fearful behavior and calls for developing trust instead (Francis 2017, Francis 2018). The story of sinking Peter who calls “Lord, save me!” embodies therefore a key Christian attitude (Francis 2020). During the migration crisis, for instance, Francis acknowledged the fears of migrants as well as those from the host countries (Francis 2018); during the recent pandemic, he addressed the fears of the lonely, people without work, and civil servants (Francis 2020). In handling fear Francis takes two directions: his pastoral strategy is highly Christocentric, urging faithful to turn to Christ in every difficult situation. His missionary strategy is humanistic, proposing trust as the opposite of fear. By emphasizing solidarity he addresses a non-Christian audience with a universal language of interpersonal relations.

Still, it seems that identification of fear is the first step in any healing process. Monika Renz suggests that without recognizing fear as a very basic human experience, it is impossible to proceed with healing. The first step to individual salvation, therefore, leads through acknowledging human weakness (Mark 10:51) and this weakness could be identified as existential fear (Neuner and Zulehner 2015). For pastoral theology, this is an utmost question—how can the Church address these fears relevantly without ever sliding either into cheap moralizing or into incomprehensible theologizing? How to address deep personal fears on the one hand and common social fears on the other? How to develop a sensitive and professional understanding of the phenomenon to

5 APP. <http://www.farnostsalvator.cz/> [31.7.2019]



distinguish between the two? How to understand which fears are justified, and which are imported and promoted by others, for instance, politicians?

The Academic Parish decided to address fear directly by open identification of particular social problems; it chose a transparent and rational way to confront the heated emotions by reasoning. Although this might be a way of dealing with fear in a particular community, it does not pose a universal pastoral instruction. While psychology claims that addressing emotions with reason does not function well enough, it is feasible to apply a somewhat holistic approach when handling people's fear—to address their body, mind, and soul through accessible means, such as personal relations, storytelling, and art interventions.

It is possible to see diakonia of the parish in delineating ethical questions and taking a rational and objective stand in heated public debates. While it may look like a spontaneous prophetic voice at first, a closer look reveals it could be interpreted as a deliberate pastoral strategy as well. My respondents favored solidarity with people in need although they did not know how to address such a complex issue well. Their confusion could stem from a subtle tension between their own emotions bolstered by disinformation campaigns on the one hand, and a Christian call to love and solidarity on the other. Such conflict is not restricted to the Academic Parish; its members perhaps demonstrated certain responsibility in handling the issue carefully due to their rational reflection. I hold that the parish—by entering the public debate—provided its members and audience with basic education, support, and arguments for further dialogue with their friends, families, and colleagues.

Handling fear in pastoral ministry

This research has disclosed two phenomena with a high pastoral relevance: promotion of trust and use of media. The following discussion outlines possible directions for reflective pastoral ministry.

Emotions play a key role in times of distress and insecurity. Global problems—despite being communicated virtually—seem close and threatening with social media. Addressing emotions such as confusion and fear in a proper manner seems thus an important pastoral task. McClure observes that in scholarship of philosophy, psychology, ethics, and theology, emotions were often neglected. Thus,

understanding of where they come from and how they function remains a major task for many scholars today (McClure 2019, 8). In pastoral theology both positive and negative emotions need to be carefully recognized, identified, and treated adequately for “the joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age... are the joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the followers of Christ” (GS 1). A call for *aggiornamento*, identification of current needs and adaptation to a new pastoral situation, is urgent once again. So, what are people expecting from their Church in times of crisis? What kind of consolation and support, for instance, can churches offer to people in secular societies? Telling stories has been shown to be much more useful in changing minds as anything else (Rutledge 2016, 154; Coyle 2014). Thus, it seems that identifying experiential truth can be more important than delivering propositional truth in a proper ministerial strategy. Sermons and pastoral counseling, for example, are useful pastoral means for developing trust (Ganzevoort 2012, 218–219).

I return to Pope Francis and his strategy for dealing with fear—to the development of trust. How can trust be maintained effectively and promoted credibly by the Church? Francis is shifting attention from the negative (fear) to the positive (trust) as to emphasize the liberating character of the Christian message: “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear... The one who fears is not made perfect in love (1 John 4:18).” With Francis, however, it seems as if the trajectory was not direct from fear to love, but rather indirect, from fear through trust to love. It may correspond well with the holistic perspective: a way from fear of the body through trust of the mind to love of the soul. It seems as if trust played the role of an agent—bridging a large gap between painful anxieties and liberating love. But how can the church apply its strategy on two different levels, social and individual?

Promoting societal trust—both social and religious—is a rather demanding task in post-communist societies with a democratic deficit (Sedláčková 2013). Czech society, for instance, shows a high tendency to skepticism and distrust (Hamplová 2013). The churches rank as the least-trusted institutions with 25 % of confidence.⁶ How—if at all—shall

6 CVVM. 2017. https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form-2content/documents/c2/a4279/f9/po170410.pdf [10.4.2017]

churches communicate a message of faith if their fellow citizens struggle with elementary trust? It is a reciprocal relation though; if the Church wants to promote trust in the general population, it needs to be established as a trustworthy partner for communicating ethical, cultural, and political values.

Promoting individual trust, on the other hand, seems pastorally more feasible through individualized ministry and counseling. With a reference to Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, Csiszar claims that a "logo-pastoral" approach with its existential character would allow for addressing people's essential concerns naturally (Csiszar 2021). Hence, a large area of pastoral care, from parishes (churches) through chaplaincies (public institutions) to specific ministries (spiritual guidance) would allow for supporting people in their existential and spiritual fulfillment—a natural way of developing trust—and ultimately the most direct access to God.

For addressing people's anxiety a responsible use of media is essential. New social media, observes McClure, "provide public forums for sharing and expressing emotions—often very strong—with possibly grave consequences" (McClure 2019, 3). It is important for the Church to handle media with consideration; a choice identitarian or disinformation media instead of mainstream media contributes to the low credibility of the Church (Petráček 2020). Media strategy and literacy should be reflected when the Church communicates its message such as endorsement of societal trust. Public service media, as a guardian of a democratic society, should be understood as a reliable partner for the Church too. While their mutual relation is often problematic for various reasons, it is necessary for the Church to recognize mainstream media as beneficial in protecting similar values, such as truth and human rights (Muchova 2022). This can be reciprocal, the Church also should challenge the media when they divert from their objective and independent reporting and, for instance, contribute to rising fear and distress through misleading or confusing information.

Conclusion

Examining global crises and their key aspect—fear—have been crucial for the Church throughout its history. Pastoral ministry today strives for understanding the driving forces of human behavior, both social and spiritual, to respond in a relevant and timely fashion. This research has therefore ex-

plored a specific form of response as exercised in the Academic Parish of Prague.

By positioning the public activities of the parish under diakonia of the Church, it has argued that the Academic Parish challenged the emotion of fear with reasoning; it tried to cultivate a responsible reflection both within the Church and society. In times of recent crises, the parish emphasized truth in order to navigate people towards critical thinking, and, by doing so, to reduce their fear and sense of insecurity. The parish entered the public space to serve the poor of its context—seekers and disoriented ones. It was recognized as a specific pastoral approach that functions effectively in this particular community and its target academic group; however, it is not universal for the Church in general. This chaplaincy ministry can nevertheless illustrate diversity and pluralism within the Church—each community has its specific pastoral needs as well as charismas that must be treated individually and specifically. This research has maintained that cultivating trust in society is an important pastoral challenge for the future. With reference to Pope Francis it emphasized the importance of nurturing trust as a bridging agent in addressing personal and common fears. Eventually, it suggested a new perspective on using media; in this information age the Church is invited not only to see mainstream media as a partner in spreading its mission—promotion of love—but also as an important ally in their common goal—exploration of truth.

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