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The Mission of Lay Theologians in the Contemporary Church

Abstract: The article focuses on the issue of the theologically educated laity and the growth in their number and of their role since the 20th century. It shows their peculiar role: they are not mere substitutes for the lack of clerical theologians, they have specific missions. The lay theologians can also reflect theologically on the contemporary Church and the world from different standpoints than the clerics and thus enrich the development of theology as a discipline and of the Church and contribute to the announcement of the Gospel in the contemporary world.

Key words: theology, laity, theological faculty, synodality, contemporary evangelization

Introduction

The question of the laity in the Church, developed after the Second Vatican Council and, increasingly discussed in the current synodal paradigm, covers a wide range of areas: from their involvement in liturgical ministries, through the various possibilities of preaching and evangelization and the position of women in the Church, to the participation of the laity in the Church's governance. In this contribution I want to focus on the peripheral issue of the theologically educated laity, their specificities, their gradual development, and what are particular ways in which they can contribute to the overall development of theology as a research field and as a church. From the point of view of canon law, I draw here on the rights

and duties contained above all in canons 208, 218, 225, 229 §§ 2 and 3, which describe the fundamental rights with regard to theological education, research, secularity or dignity of the laity in the Church. In this article I also want to take into account the statements in recent documents of the Popes or the Council of Bishops on the topic, such as: the instruction *Donum veritatis*, the exhortation *Evangelia gaudium*, the motu proprio *Ad theologiam promovendam*, or the conclusions of the Synod on Synodality in 2024.

Secularity and the mission of the theologian-layperson

The evolution of the Church's approach to laity, especially in the 20th century, has been described in many publications, so it is not the focus of this article. The influence of the great theologians, especially Yves Congar, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner and others, led already during the Council and continues to lead to an ever-deepening understanding of the place of the laity, who are no longer defined only negatively, as "persons without ordination" or persons who are neither clerics nor religious, but in the context of the theology of the People of God (LG¹ 38) as members of this People of God and members of the mystical Body of Christ. This dignity of the laity derives from their baptismal consecration and election. In contrast to canon 207 § 1 of the CIC² the text of the exhortation *Christifideles laici*³ which is already a few years younger, speaks of the need to define and present a positive description of the vocation and mission of the laity (and then develops various characteristics of the laity in the text of the exhortation). The text of the CCEO⁴ also presents

¹ Dogmatic constitution on the Church "*Lumen gentium*" promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI. November 21, 1964 (hereinafter: LG), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html [accessed 4.07.2024].

² *Codex iuris canonici auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP promulgates* (25.01.1983). *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 75, pars II (1983), pp. 1–320; corrections: *Appendix de die 22 Septembris 1983*, pp. 321–324.

³ IOANNES PAULUS II: *Adhortatio apostolica post-synodalis "Christifideles laici" de vocatione et missione Laicorum in Ecclesia et in mundo* (30.12.1988). *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 81 (1989), n. 9.

⁴ *Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus* (18.10.1990). Roma 1990.

the conciliar reference in a somewhat different way from the Western Code, in a more positive way, when in canons 399 and following it speaks of the specificity of the laity, consisting in their own vocation (*indoles saecularis vocatio propria*). Pope Francis' new and deeper reflection on the concept of ministerium (in the case of acolyte, lector, catechist)⁵ also goes in this direction, referring to the lay faithful as a person who lives his or her baptism in fruitful collaboration and co-responsibility⁶ and not as a mere substitute in cases of clergy shortage. These ministries are also vocational in nature, as they are a permanent, lifetime ministry to local (particular) churches. The bearers of these ministries are not to see themselves as privileged and superior to other believers, but as persons serving with a specific gift to this community and, in liturgical ministries, primarily for the glory of God. A similar development can be seen in the involvement of the laity in the governing authority of the Church, especially in the judicial or executive sphere.⁷ Theological reflection is also defined by the Second Vatican Council. It is the task of the whole People of God, and especially of spiritual pastors and theologians, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to listen to, understand and interpret all that our times say and to judge it in the light of God's Word, so that the revealed truth may be ever more deeply understood, better known and more adequately presented

⁵ Pope Francis' revision seeks to follow the theological direction already outlined in the Apostolic Letter of Pope Paul VI *Ministeria quaedam* of 15 August 1972. Cf. FRANCIS: *Litterae apostolicae motu proprio datae Spiritus Domini quibus canonis 230 § 1 Codicis Iuris Canonici normae de aditu personarum feminini sexus ad institutum ministerium Lectoratus et Acolythatus mutantur* (10.01.2021), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/la/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210110_spiritus-domini.html [accessed 4.07.2024]; Cf. FRANCIS: *Apostolic Letter issued "motu proprio" by the supreme pontiff Francis "Antiquum ministerium" instituting the Ministry of Catechist* (10.05.2021), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210510_antiquum-ministerium.html [accessed 4.07.2024].

⁶ Cf. CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP AND THE SACRAMENTS: *Letter to the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences on the Rite of the Ordination of Catechists* Prot N. 627/21 (3.12.2021), n. 12, which, although it speaks of catechists, we can apply this to other ministries of the acolyte and lectorate.

⁷ For instance, the enabling of lay prefects of the dicasteries of the Roman Curia after the promulgation of the Apostolic Constitution of Pope Francis *Praedicate Evangelium* in 2022, or the already common participation of the laity in the judicial power of the Church as judges, defenders of the union, lawyers, notaries, etc. Cf. also CIC, can. 228 § 1 according to which suitable lay persons may be entrusted with certain ecclesiastical offices and tasks (*officia et munera*) which they may hold according to juridical provisions, namely, they may, for example, be ecclesiastical judges according to can. 1421 § 2.

(GS⁸ 44). It is very difficult to distinguish conceptually between the cleric theologian and the lay theologian. Many of the clerics are religious and so proceed from the theological charism of their own order or congregation. Diocesan clerical theologians often come out of the influence of some new movement or community in the Church. And in essence, each priest has his own specific personal spirituality with which he approaches his theological expression. Clerical theology should always be influenced by the pastoral wisdom of the cleric, by his ministry and proclamation of the Word of God, by the Eucharist which is the heart and life-centre of the priestly ministry⁹ or by his closer attachment to the superior through the vow of obedience before ordination. There are also various influences of particular spirituality or personal piety among lay theologians, but their specific characteristic is secularity. The life situations of the laity are even more diverse than those of clerics: they may be married, parents, but they may also be celibate and involved in many social or cultural spheres. A true and authentic theology must always grow out of a deep inner spiritual life, even for the laity. The layperson is called to infuse his Christian life into the everyday existence that places him or her at the center of the hopes and tensions of the life of people and the structures of society. It is the following of Christ in the ordinary life of man, in their work of striving for change and improvement of the conditions of life, which presupposes social, cultural, political, etc., dimensions.¹⁰ We can say that Christian laymen are responsible for this world more specifically than clerics; they are more called to secular matters, so they can retroactively enrich theology with this secular (but not lightened, ChL 4)¹¹ view. The secularity of

⁸ *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern world "Gaudium et spes"* promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI. December 7, 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html [accessed 4.07.2024].

⁹ Cf. BENEDICTUS XVI: *Adhortatio apostolica postsynodalis "Sacramentum caritatis"* (22.02.2007). *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 99 (2007), pp. 166–167, n. 80.

¹⁰ A. BARRUFFO: "Laici." In: *Slovník spirituality*. Eds. S. DE FIORES, T. GOFFI. Kostelní Vydří 1999, pp. 443–444.

¹¹ Cf. *Postsynodal Apostolic exhortation "Christifideles laici" of his Holiness John Paul II on the vocation and the mission of the Lay faithful in the Church and in the world* (herein-after: ChL) https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici.html [accessed 4.07.2024]. But it is not possible to confuse secularity with the negative term secularism. On the contrary – in contrast to secularism, secular society is Christianized and theologically interpreted the basic concepts of society. Because even today's human world is opening more and more widely to a spiritual

the laity is described above all by the texts LG 31 and ChL 15: The common dignity by virtue of baptism contains a limitation which, although it distinguishes the layman from the priest, religious or nun, does not separate him from them. The Second Vatican Council teaches that this special manner consists in the temporal disposition of the laity: “The proper and special distinction of the laity is their temporal character. And so to be – to act in the world is for the laity not only an anthropological and sociological fact, but also (and above all) a specifically theological and ecclesial fact. In the world, God reveals to them his will and their particular vocation to? seek the kingdom of God by working on temporal values by directing them according to God’s will.” In the light of the text of ChL 24, we can see in the lay theologians the persons whose gifts and charisms enrich the Church in various forms. However, no charism dispenses from feedback and submission to the Pastors of the Church. The theologian, then, interprets the Word of God and the teaching of the Church, which must not be his own intellectualism and search for his own glory,¹² but is meant to serve, in the context of the treasure of the Church’s teaching, a better understanding of God and his purposes with creation. The mission of the lay theologian can go either “to the world,” seeking to interpret the Gospel message in more theologically understandable language in purely secular areas (culture, politics, economics, social justice, media, ecology, etc.), or “inward” of the Church community, seeking a better or more up-to-date expression of the doctrine of God for contemporary Catholics. And to do this, he or she can then bring inspiration from things secular for the good of the Church. The CIC contains provisions for theologians (i.e. also lay theologians) mainly in canon 218: Those engaged in the sacred disciplines have a just freedom of inquiry and of expressing their opinion prudently on those matters in which they possess expertise, while observing the submission due to the Magisterium of the Church. Lay people are also entitled to acquire a broader knowledge of the sacred science taught at the Church’s universities and faculties or institutes of religious studies by attending lectures and obtaining academic degrees. They may also, while observing the provisions of the statutes regarding the required qualifications, receive a commission from the lawful ecclesiastical superior

and transcendent understanding of life, to a new search for religious values, to a renewed sense of the sacred.

¹² Pope Francis also warns against spiritual worldliness and its concrete hidden manifestations in the ecclesial community in his Apostolic Exhortation on the proclamation of the Gospel in the contemporary world, *Evangelii gaudium*, especially in nn. 93–95.

to teach sacred science.¹³ The guarantee of the faithfulness of a theologian (at least of one who lectures in a seminary or ecclesiastical faculty) is then to be secured by the provision of canon 833 n. 6, which contains the obligation to make a personal profession of faith in the wording approved by the Apostolic See for teachers of theology at the beginning of the exercise of the office assumed. Since the Catholic Church is a hierarchical community lay and clerical theologians alike must be aware, on the one hand, of their subordination to the magisterium (in researching and proclaiming the new discoveries legitimately) and, on the other hand, of the sacramental role of the clergy, which the laity cannot replace; but theology as such is neither lay nor clerical. It is to be above all true. In this area, too, we can see the development of canon 208 CIC, according to which all Christians are equal in dignity and action. On the basis of this equality, all collaborate in the development of the Body of Christ, each according to his or her own position and tasks. We can therefore summarize that the lay theologian is a person who has a specific charism and a specific sensitivity to view and scientifically interpret God's revelation in the context of the secular environment, culture, and times. Another document that describes the mission of the theologian in the contemporary Church is the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's Instruction *Donum veritatis* on the ecclesial vocation of the theologian (May 24, 1990),¹⁴ which also does not distinguish between the lay theologian and the cleric, but further develops the line of collaboration with the magisterium and the ecclesiality of theology: "Among the vocations awakened in this way by the Spirit in the Church is that of the theologian. His role is to pursue in a particular way an ever deeper understanding of the Word of God found in the inspired Scriptures and handed on by the living Tradition of the Church."¹⁵ The actual aim of theology is to understand the sense of revelation better and better, and the task of the theologian is to select from the culture of his environment elements that would allow him to better illuminate this or that aspect of the mystery of faith. The freedom of inquiry manifests itself in the context of the People of God, a gift that is exercised within the framework of rational knowledge, the object of which is given by revelation, transmitted and interpreted in the Church under the authority of

¹³ CIC 1983, can. 229 §§ 2 and 3.

¹⁴ CONGREGAZIONE PER LA DOTTRINA DELLA FEDE: *Istruzione »Donum veritatis« sulla vocazione ecclesiale del teologo*. Città del Vaticano 1993 (hereinafter: DoV).

¹⁵ DoV 6.

the teaching office and received by faith. For the teaching office is that which is endowed with the charism of infallibility in the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ The International Theological Commission recalls that a significant number of lay theologians have specific experience in the areas of interaction between Church and world, Gospel and life which may not be experienced by clerical or religious theologians, and so it is often the case that in new situations theologians provide the initial setting out of a “faith seeking understanding.” Therefore, the prayer of the community is needed for theologians to work for the benefit of the Church. They should cling to the basic criteria of Catholic theology and realize that their work (questions, discussions, seeking expression) is by its intrinsic nature provisional, and therefore they should submit their work to the whole Church for examination and evaluation.¹⁷

The development of lay theologians in a secularized society

Already the early Church knew lay theologians (the apologists Justin, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria), they also appeared (though less so) in the Middle Ages or in the modern period (e.g. Marsilius of Padua, Thomas Morus). Many began as lay theologians, philosophers, historians (Jerome, Gregory of Nazianzus, Augustine). A kind of monopoly of the clergy in theology developed in connection with the development of universities and church schools, but after the secularization of society and schools, especially in the early 20th century, the situation began to open up again to lay theologians, who are now a normal part of the Church and society again.¹⁸ Lay students of theology begin to reappear in some universities (Leuven, Dublin, New York, Chicago, Montreal, Milan, Nijmegen) at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries; they usually study primarily in other faculties and study theology in addition, in order to be able to

¹⁶ Cf. DoV 10, 12, 15.

¹⁷ INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION: *Theology today: perspectives, principles and criteria*, n. 47, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20111129_teologia-oggi_en.html [accessed 4.07.2024].

¹⁸ For more details on the topic see: J. MIKOŁAJEC: *Posługa teologów świeckich w Kościele w Polsce*. Opole 2000, pp. 26–29.

teach religion as a school subject.¹⁹ The first female students of theology appear in the 1920s (taught by Professor M. Schmauss in Münster). The first doctorate in theology in Germany was awarded to a layperson in 1952. Around 1968, however, the number of academically theologically educated laypersons begins to grow. They were mostly former seminarians who decided to have left the preparation for the priesthood but still wanted to graduate from a theological school and work in the church. As the number of clergy declined, the demand for such lay personnel in Germany began to grow.²⁰ The study of theology, which was historically associated primarily with preparation for the priesthood, has gradually been opened to the laity since about the 1960s. Among them, lay theologians have gradually established themselves as teachers in theological faculties and scholars in sacred theology, in addition to professionals working for the Church.²¹

Pope John Paul II, in the context of the need for catechesis and professional education of the laity, also writes about the need for their theological education: “The theological education of the laity is becoming more and more urgent today, not only because of the natural dynamism of deepening their faith, but also so that they can give the world, with its difficult and complex problems, an answer to the question of the hope they have.”²² The fact that the theological sciences are attracting an increasing number of lay people in addition to seminarians was already acknowledged in John Paul II’s 1979 Apostolic Constitution on the Church’s Universities and Faculties *Sapientia christiana*: “Ecclesiastical Faculties are open to all, whether ecclesiastics or laity, who can legally give testimony to leading (*testimonium legitimum*) a moral life and to having completed the previous studies appropriate to enrolling in the Faculty.”²³

Pope Francis’ constitution *Veritatis gaudium* also envisages both clerics and laity as students and teachers: “[Ecclesiastical studies] in fact, are

¹⁹ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 31

²⁰ M. KAPLÁNEK: “Místo teologicky vzdělaných křesťanů-laiků v pastoraci.” *Studia theologica* 30/4 (2007), p. 48

²¹ For instance, pastoral assistants, catechists, employees of church courts, workers in missions and evangelization activities, lay workers in episcopal curia, workers in social services, non-profit organizations, etc. Their growth in the Czech Church occurred with the increase in the freedom of the Church after 1990. In the German-speaking area, this increase in pastoral vocations by lay people has been occurring since the 1950s.

²² Cf. ChL 60.

²³ IOANNES PAULUS II: *Constitutio apostolica “Sapientia christiana”* (15.04.1979). *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 71 (1979), p. 484, n. 31.

called to offer opportunities and processes for the suitable formation of priests, consecrated men and women, and committed lay people. At the same time, they are called to be a sort of providential cultural laboratory in which the Church carries out the performative interpretation of the reality brought about by the Christ event and nourished by the gifts of wisdom and knowledge by which the Holy Spirit enriches the People of God in manifold ways – from the *sensus fidei fidelium* to the magisterium of the bishops, and from the charism of the prophets to that of the doctors and theologians.”²⁴

Cardinal Ratzinger, then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and future Pope Benedict XVI, states in the introduction to the instruction *Donum veritatis* that the importance of the theologian and theology for the whole community of believers became evident in a new way on the occasion of the Second Vatican Council. Until then, theology had been considered the work of a limited number of clerics, an elite and abstract work that could hardly attract the interest of the general Church. The new way of looking at the faith and its expression, which was confirmed at the Council, was perceiving it as the fruit of a drama, hardly contemplated before, of a new theological reflection which began after the First World War in conjunction with new spiritual and cultural movements.²⁵ The Directory for Bishops *Apostolorum successeurs* reminds bishops that although it is they who, by participating in the apostolic ministry, have a certain charism of truth under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, it is incumbent upon them to preserve and interpret the Word of God and to judge with authority what is consistent with it and what is not,²⁶ they need the help of theologians to do so. They are called to acquire, in union with the magisterium, an ever deeper knowledge of the Word of God contained in Sacred Scripture and handed down by the living tradition of the Church. Theological investigations, even if they do not constitute a norm of truth, enrich and clarify the depth of the magisterium.²⁷ The bishop is therefore to collaborate with them and to engage in a fruitful

²⁴ FRANCIS: *Apostolic Constitution “Veritatis gaudium” on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties* (27.12.2017), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20171208_veritatis-gaudium.html, n. 3 [accessed 4.07.2024]; http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost_constitutions/documenti/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20171208_veritatis-gaudium.html [accessed 4.07.2024].

²⁵ Cf. DoV 1.

²⁶ DoV 8, DoV 40.

²⁷ DoV 6, DoV 40.

dialogue, in mutual respect and love.²⁸ In his 2004 exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis does not speak of lay theologians, but of theologians in general. He turns the discourse around by saying not so much who is to evangelize but how, and in doing so he emphasizes charisms, among which we can count the charism of being a theologian. According to the Pope, theology takes on considerable importance in dialogue with other sciences, especially in the way it communicates the Gospel to diverse cultural contexts and addressees. The evangelizing Church appreciates and encourages the charism of theologians and their efforts in the field of theological research, which contribute to dialogue with the world of culture and science. The Pope invites theologians to fulfil this ministry as part of the Church's salvific mission. To this end, however, it is essential that they keep at heart the evangelizing focus of the Church and of theology itself, and not be content with a desk-bound theology.²⁹ In November 2023, Pope Francis decided to update the statutes of the Pontifical Academy of Theology, and in the *motu proprio* *Ad theologiam promovendam*, he calls for a "courageous cultural revolution" to make theology prophetic and to dialogue with different traditions and disciplines in the light of Revelation. It encourages a contextual epistemology by understanding human life as a theologically indispensable resource. According to the Pope, "Good theologians, like good shepherds, smell the fragrance of ordinary life, people and the street, and by their reflection they pour oil and wine on the wounds of the people."³⁰ Theology must show that it is a true critical knowledge as a knowledge of reason, not abstract and ideological, but spiritual, worked out on its knees, a knowledge that is full of adoration and prayer; a knowledge that is transcendent and at the same time attentive to the voice of the people, and therefore a theology "of the people," mercifully turned to the open wounds of humanity and creation and to the folds of human history, to which it prophesizes the hope of the final

²⁸ Cf. CONGREGAZIONE PER I VESCOVI: "Direttorio Successori degli apostoli (*Apostolorum successores*) per il ministero pastorale dei Vescovi" (22.02.2004). *Enchiridion Vaticanum* series, vol. 22. Bologna 2006, n. 126.

²⁹ Cf. FRANCIS: Apostolic exhortation "*Evangelii gaudium*" of the Holy Father Francis to the bishops, clergy, consecrated persons and the lay faithful on the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world (24.11.2013), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, n. 133 [accessed 4.07.2024]

³⁰ Cf. FRANCIS: *Motu proprio* "*Ad theologiam promovendum*" (1.11.2023), n. 3, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html [accessed 4.07.2024].

consummation.³¹ The Pope therefore points out that it is necessary to combine the theoretical and experimental components of science, that the great theologians were also men of prayer or mysticism, and that this connection is missing today. The theologian of today, more than before, should therefore go out among the people and seek among them the motives for his work and also the answers to his questions. In this context, we can reflect on how the secularity and experience of the lay theologian can help here, and whether it does? So if the reflections of theologians were the ground on which the Council grew, we might ask, what about the Synod now?

The place of theologians and their participation in the prophetic ministry after the Synod on Synodality

Church synodality thus obliges theologians to practice theology in a synodal form, and to promote among themselves the ability to listen, to dialogue, to discern, and to integrate the multiplicity and diversity of judgments and contributions. It is therefore important that there are places, including institutional spaces, in which the experience of collegiality and theological fraternity is lived and realized.³² The summary report after the first part of the Synod on Synodality, entitled *The Synodal Church in Mission*, issued on October 28, 2023, recalls several aspects concerning theologians. Theological inquiry must be characterized by a logic of dialogue that manifests itself in mutual learning and common journeying.³³ The theological foundations of integral ecology are to be incorporated into the Church's doctrine, liturgy, and practice.³⁴ There is a need for theologians to reflect anew and deepen the reciprocity between the bishop and the local church on a theological level.³⁵ There is also a need for new

³¹ Cf. *ibidem*, n. 7

³² *Ibidem*, n. 6

³³ SYNOD23: *Relazione di Sintesi della prima Sessione della XVI Assemblea Generale Ordinaria del Sinodo dei Vescovi (4–29 ottobre 2023) e risultati delle Votazioni* (28.10.2023), n. 2, e, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2023/10/28/0751/01653.html> [accessed 2.04.2025].

³⁴ *Ibidem*, n. 4, q.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, n. 12, f.

reflection on how theologians and canonists can contribute to the work of the synodal assembly and to the processes of the synodal church.³⁶ Finally, the specificity of women theologians (missionaries, saints, mystics) who can be a source of inspiration and strength and an incentive for women and men of our time is not neglected.³⁷ After the Synod on Synodality in the autumn of 2024, the Pope decided not to publish an apostolic exhortation directly as a final document,³⁸ which should have both practical and normative impact: its implementation is entrusted to the General Secretariat of the Synod, together with the various dicasteries of the Roman Curia.³⁹ The mission of theologians is summarized in the second part of this document, which describes the conversion of relationships and the various charisms as follows: “Among the many ministries of the Church, the Assembly has valued the contribution of the various theological disciplines to understanding faith and discernment. Theologians, men and women, help the People of God develop an understanding of the reality illuminated by Revelation and formulate appropriate responses and appropriate language for the mission of the Church. In the synodal and missionary Church, “the charism of theology [...] is called to a specific ministry [...]. Together with the experience of faith and the insight of truth on the part of the faithful people and the proclamation of the pastors, it contributes to penetrating ever more deeply into the depths of the Gospel.” Moreover, “like every other Christian vocation, the ministry of theologians, besides being personal, also has a communal and collegial character,” especially when it is exercised on the basis of the canonical mission entrusted to them in the form of teaching in the Church’s academic institutions. In the Church, therefore, “synodality obliges theologians to cultivate theology in a synodal way, whereby they should cultivate the capacity to listen, to dialogue, to discern and to process the many different pressing tasks and contributions. In this regard, it is urgent to promote dialogue between

³⁶ Ibidem, n. 20, g.

³⁷ Ibidem, n. 9, d.

³⁸ XVI ASSEMBLEA GENERALE ORDINARIA DEL SINODO DEI VESCOVI: *Seconda Sessione (2–27 ottobre 2024). Per una Chiesa sinodale: comunione, partecipazione, missione, Documento finale* (26.10.2024), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20241026_doc-final-sinodo2024-chiesa-sinodale_it.html [accessed 2.11.2024] (hereinafter: *Documento finale* 2024).

³⁹ Cf. FRANCIS: *Apostolic Constitution “Episcopalis communio” of the Holy Father Francis on the Synod of bishops* (15.09.2018), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost-constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html [accessed 2.11.2024].

pastors and those who develop theological research through appropriate institutional platforms. The Assembly encourages theological institutions to continue research aimed at clarifying and deepening the meaning of synodality and at accompanying the formation of the People of God in local churches.”⁴⁰ This dimension concerns clerical and lay theologians, and if they are able to communicate and look at specific topics together it can be an inspiration for other groups in the Church. If they will be able to “live synodality”? in already existing councils (pastoral councils, economic councils of parishes or dioceses, diocesan synods, parish councils, etc.) or in councils newly created, this will be a certain model of communication for other structures in dioceses and parish communities.

The laicization of theological faculties (illustrated by an example)

For some time now, therefore, there has been a certain laicization of theological faculties. The environment that used to serve exclusively for the formation of future priests and deacons has gradually opened up again to lay people who want to serve the Church practically or through theological reflection. We will illustrate this change by looking at the situation of the Faculty of Theology in Olomouc. The development of theological faculties in the Czech secularized environment was interrupted during the totalitarian era and resumed after 1990.⁴¹ I will try to summarize the aspects of the said process that are related to lay theologians. The Olomouc Faculty of Theology developed successfully after its restoration in the autumn of 1990 and theological disciplines prevailed at that time. They provided for the formation of candidates for priesthood from the Moravian ecclesiastical province and some religious institutions, as well as for the formation of lay students. In the Czech Republic, the Catholic Faculty of Theology of Charles University in Prague has also been restored (although the opportunities for lay studies here were very limited until 2003). In 1990–1991, another theological faculty was established in

⁴⁰ *Documento finale* 2024, n. 67

⁴¹ On this topic cf. M. MENKE: “Pozycja prawna katolickich wydziałów teologicznych na terytorium Republiki Czeskiej od 1950 roku.” *Kościół i Prawo* 21/1 (2019), pp. 29–50.

České Budějovice, focusing mainly on the study of the laity. As of 2024 the dean of this faculty is a lay pastoral theologian Michal Opatrný. Due to the higher religiosity in Moravia, the Olomouc faculty enjoys a somewhat higher number of theology students than the other two faculties, but there is also a visible crisis of spiritual values and vocations, and the number of theological students has declined rapidly over the last 20 years. Olomouc is also the seat of the Olomouc Seminary (where candidates from the dioceses of Brno, Ostrava-Opava and the Archdiocese of Olomouc are prepared for the priesthood) and the national Theological Convict.⁴² In 2024, there are 16 seminary students in the theological seminary and about ten students in the Convict. This is a drastic decrease not only compared to the post-revolutionary years, but also after the wave of enthusiasm subsided, and the initial wave of candidates who could not study theology during the totalitarian era. By comparison, in 1990, 130 diocesan seminarians and 52 religious entered the seminary in all five years, who had not yet reestablished their monasteries and therefore lived in the seminary with the diocesan seminarians.⁴³ Since about the turn of the millennium, there has been a decline in the spiritual vocations and in the desire of the laity to study theology, and the faculty has been forced to offer more and more study programs related in whole or in part to theology: in the field of charity, social and humanitarian work, and in the field of social pedagogy. However, the faculty has become prominent due to the fact that in 2006–2010 the first woman in Czech history, the Dominican biblical theologian Gabriela Vlková OP, held a post of dean there. In 2024 the dean of the faculty is a layman, a psychologist and patrologist Vít Hušek. For comparison: in 1999, the CMTF conducted scientific research and education in three accredited disciplines: theology, teaching for the second level of primary schools and Christian education. A total of 678 students studied at the faculty: 601 in master's and 77 in doctoral programmes. There were 28 academic staff, most of them around 40 years of age at the assistant professor level (there were only two full professors).⁴⁴ In 2010, the faculty had ten (or eleven, if the cooperation with the Higher Vocational School of Social

⁴² There are no minor seminaries (*seminaria minora*) in the Czech Republic, as referred to in can. 234 CIC. Instead, all dioceses in the Czech Republic have established a preparatory year prior to entry into the seminary and theological faculty, called Theological Convict.

⁴³ See: <https://www.knezskyseminar.cz/o-seminari/bohoslovci/> [accessed 2.04.2025].

⁴⁴ Cf. *Annual report on the activities of the CMTF in 1999, dated 20 March 2000*. Report provided to the author by the Dean's Office, as it is no longer available on the faculty website.

Sciences in Olomouc Caritas is taken into account in this regard) study fields and programmes with 1,373 students: 935 in bachelor's, 408 in master's, and 30 in doctoral programmes. In addition to theological studies and religious pedagogy, these were more disciplines and programmes, such as: charity and social work, social policy and social work, international humanitarian and social work. There were 60 academic staff, 24 research staff, most of them around 40 years of age at the assistant professor level (there were already five full professors). The faculty published two professional journals, *Studia Theologica* (in cooperation with the Faculty of Theology of the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, the Catholic Faculty of Theology of Charles University in Prague and the Faculty of Theology of Trnava University in Bratislava) and *Theologica Olomucensia* (*Acta Universitatis Palackianae Olomucensis*, *Facultas theologica Cyrillo-methodiana*). The faculty introduced lifelong learning programmes and participated in the lectures of the University of the Third Age. International cooperation (participation in international programmes and international mobility) has increased.⁴⁵ In 2022 (after the end of the Covid-19 epidemic), the Faculty had nine departments, two research centres (the Centre for Work with Patristic, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and the Institute of Social Health OUSHI), ten study fields (or eleven in cooperation with the Higher Vocational School of Social Sciences in Olomouc Caritas), with a total of 1,582 students: 1,108 in bachelor's, 415 in master's, and 61 in doctoral (already mostly non-theological) programmes. New disciplines and programmes were developed, such as Ethics and Culture in Media Communication, Online Theology, Applied Psychotherapy and Innovation in Social Work, and Social Work with Children and Youth. The faculty had 66 academic staff, 26 researchers, most of them around 40–60 years of age at the assistant professor level (there were five full professors). International mobility was high, with the International Teaching Week lecture series underway and an increasing number of grants and projects submitted.⁴⁶

Thus, we can summarize that despite the decline in theology students and seminarians, especially during the first 20 years after the Velvet Revolution, the faculty also generated a certain number of lay theologians.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Annual report on the activities of the CMTF in 2010*, 27 April 2011. Report provided to the author by the Dean's Office, as it is no longer available on the faculty website.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Annual report on the activities of the CMTF in 2022*, dated 22 March 2023. See: <https://files.upol.cz/sites%2Fpub%2FpubNormy%2F2023%20-%20VZ%20CMTF%20o%20%C4%8Dinnosti.pdf> [accessed 2.04.2025].

These were not only “former theologians,” but also more lay people who in the early days of Sts Cyril and Methodius Faculty of Theology studied theology as a primary discipline. Out of these, a number of pastoral workers emerged (e.g. in the areas of marriage formation, family and youth pastoral care, health and social services, etc.), catechists, workers in diocesan curia, ecclesiastical courts, workers in the social and non-profit spheres, in the media and political sphere, culture, but also some theologians who continue as teachers and researchers in many theological disciplines at theological faculties in the Czech Republic. From laypersons who formerly were passive consumers of the study and proclamation of the Church, they have become active personalities in the public sphere. The involvement of the laity in theology is part of the perspective of a missionary Church, a Church open to the world, as postulated by the late Pope Francis. The contribution of lay theologians can be decisive in this regard, as they are more involved in the world through their professional and family life. The participation of lay theologians may also help to counter the criticism of the clericalism of the Church (unless, of course, the opposite occurs and a kind of “clericalization” of the laity occurs, for example, in the desire for power). All Czech theological faculties operate in public universities, and as such they have to fulfil the same requirements as other university disciplines, for example, the requirement to publish their study/research results, where peer-reviewed articles in foreign journals are highly valued. The reason for the existence of theologically educated laity in the ecclesial environment is provided by the Czech pastoralist Michal Kaplánek: the Church today needs many men and women who are able to reflect theologically on the reality in which we live and thus, on the one hand, offer the richness of the Gospel to their surroundings and, on the other hand, bring into their lives and into the Church what we can discover as the work of the Holy Spirit outside the confines of the Church.⁴⁷ His view is also guided by the practical necessity of the laity in the pastorate, because of the ever-increasing shortage of clergy. The second dimension of his reflections goes towards the renewal of the Church from within, based on the reflections of the Austrian pastoralist Paul Zulehner. If we define the Church as the New People of God entrusted with many charisms, we can count among them also the gift of theology set in the context of everyday life. It is precisely in such a theology that there is a hidden

⁴⁷ M. KAPLÁNEK: “Místo teologicky vzdělaných křesťanů-laiků v pastoraci.” *Studia theologica* 30/4 (2007), p. 50.

reforming potential that contributes to the renewal of the Church. Theological education enables both priests and laity to discover the values of the Gospel where they are hidden, while at the same time courageously exposing what is not Gospel within the Church. It is in this way that theologians can participate in the prophetic mission of the Church.⁴⁸ Pope Francis is also about a paradigm change. This is a challenge for (not only lay) theologians to find ways to shape theology so that it is an essential part of contemporary culture, so that it is intelligible both for the Church and for society, so that it can respond with profound reflection also to current problems and life.

Conclusions

The evolution of recent years in the understanding of the position of the laity in the Church shows more and more deeply their dignity, their specificities, admits them to more and more activities and notes the specific gifts they may have. However, it tends to highlight the role of sacred service (as opposed to the pre-conciliar emphasis on sacred power): and this is the main task of lay theologians as well. They are to develop and proclaim the doctrine of the Church through their charisms, to serve the needs of the local churches and the universal Church. A positive aspect may be their greater connection with real contemporary life (life in relationships of marriage, family, at work as team members, but also the secular space of the media, new technologies etc.). The negatives are the forgetting of the connection with the clerics, the hierarchy, the clericalization of the laity. The hope for the future, however, may be the mutual collaboration of lay theologians and clerics, in subordination to the teaching office of the Church (magisterium), as a guarantee of the truth of the theological statement over the centuries, whereby they can enrich each other (not fight with each other) and thus arrive at a better form, content and clarity of the theological message conveyed. Greater involvement of lay theologians may not only be a way of modernizing the Church in the spirit of liberalism of secular society, but also a way of enriching and finding new tools for evangelization in understanding the contemporary mentality of those

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 50.

around us. The lay theologian should be there to help the theologians to the clerics, through a true theological reflection of reality from a different perspective, on a common path to proclaim more effectively the Good News of Christ in contemporary society.

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