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POPE FRANCIS' CONCEPT OF THEOLOGY: EXISTENCE DOES MATTER

KONCEPCJA TEOLOGII WEDŁUG PAPIEŻA FRANCISZKA: EGZYSTENCJA MA ZNACZENIE

ABSTRACT:

Documents published by Pope Francis are theological texts in the full meaning of the word. Francis writes in the first person. It is not only a rhetorical figure, but also an evidence of his “authorship” of the texts. This article seeks to present Francis’ concept of theology. His theology builds on faith, which is prior to any form of reasoning. Reasoning, including theology, is merely a servant of faith: a servant that always remains outside the mystery of faith, or the encounter of a human being with God. Therefore, the first two parts of the article are devoted to Francis’ perception of faith. The transmission of faith, or evangelization, takes place in the proclamation of the kerygma. Here also, theology plays an ancillary role. The Church lives in the world, and that determines the tasks of theology: seeking an answer to the question about what it means to be a Christian here and now. Thus, theology should study various aspects of our existence, and particularly various cultures, in the light of faith. Francis, however, distances himself from liaising theology with modern sciences.

Francis’ recognition of the primacy of God’s grace leads him to an emphasis on the significance of dialogue in the study of theology. It is interesting how Francis perceives the role of the Magisterium of the Church: it is ancillary not only

Dokumenty wydawane przez papieża Franciszka są w pełnym tego słowa znaczeniu tekstami teologicznymi. Franciszek pisze w pierwszej osobie. Jest to nie tylko zabieg retoryczny, ale świadectwo „autorskiego” charakteru tych tekstów. Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą przedstawienia Franciszkowej koncepcji teologii. Jego teologia jest oparta na wierze, która jest wcześniejsza od wszelkiego rozumowania. Rozumowanie, czyli teologia, jest tylko służebnicą wiary, służebnicą, która zawsze jakoś pozostaje na zewnątrz tajemnicy wiary, spotkania człowieka z Bogiem. Dlatego dwie pierwsze części artykułu zostały poświęcone Franciszkowemu rozumieniu wiary.

Przekaz wiary, ewangelizacja dzieją się w głoszeniu kerygmatu. Tu również teologia pozostaje w roli służebnej. Kościół żyje w świecie, wśród ludzi stworzonych i ogarniętych łaską Boga. To podstawowe spojrzenie w wierze na świat wyznacza kolejne zadania teologii: ma ona pomagać w zrozumieniu tej sytuacji, odpowiadać na pytanie: co to znaczy być chrześcijaninem tu i teraz. Dlatego zadaniem teologii jest studiowanie w świetle wiary różnych aspektów naszej egzystencji, a zwłaszcza kultur. Natomiast Franciszek z dużą rezerwą odnosi się do związków teologii i nauki współczesnej.

to faith, but, to a certain degree, also to theology. Moreover, as it turns out, theology understood in such a way draws richly from the works of modern philosophy: existentialism and the related philosophy of dialogue.

Uznanie uprzedniości łaski Boga prowadzi Franciszka do podkreślenia istotnej roli dialogu w uprawianiu teologii. Bardzo ciekawe jest Franciszkowe ujęcie roli Magisterium Kościoła. Jest ono służebne nie tylko wobec wiary, ale – w pewnym stopniu – także wobec teologii. Co więcej, jak się okazuje, tak rozumiana teologia obficie korzysta z dorobku współczesnej filozofii: egzystencjalizmu oraz filozofii dialogu.

The first part of the title indicates the main subject of this article. The other part poses a thesis: existentialist philosophy has a significant impact on Francis's theology. The inner logic of the article, however, is not subordinated to the task of proving the above thesis. Our primary purpose was to faithfully describe Francis's perception of theology: its relation to faith, its place in the Church, or its tasks. The presented thesis is one of the results of our research. Yet, existentialism in Francis's theology does not mean that his reflection is built upon existentialist philosophy. Pope Francis's thought represents theology in the strongest sense of the word, with faith as its foundation. Therefore, we begin its presentation with an analysis of *Lumen Fidei* (further referred to as LF). Chronologically, it is the first encyclical signed by Francis, however, the reason why we discuss it in the beginning of the article is its content: this is where Francis presents his perception of faith and describes the relationship between theology and faith, which defines the shape and the tasks of theology.

“A four-handed encyclical”

The encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, as Francis notes himself,¹ has two authors: Pope Benedict and Pope Francis. The double authorship is clearly visible in the text, and it seems relatively easy to distinguish between the passages which can be attributed to Benedict and those supposedly written by Francis. That easiness is a consequence of a significant difference in the nature of Benedict's and Francis's theology. However, one must neither totally trust the first impression, nor be fully satisfied with the above conclusion. It is not a document written by two authors in parallel and then “sewn together” in such a careless manner that even an untrained eye can see the stitches. Ultimately, it is Pope Francis who takes responsibility for the content of the encyclical, giving it its final shape. Therefore, that shape, which looks like a patchwork casually sewn together, needs to be regarded as the effect of editorial work based on a sound doctrinal concept. That concept is explicitly expressed in the text: „The Successor of Peter, yesterday, today and tomorrow, is always called to strengthen his brothers and sisters in the priceless treasure of that faith which God has given as a light for humanity's path” (LF 7). Each successive

¹ See LF 7.

pope is the successor of Peter in the mission of strengthening his brothers and sisters in faith. Therefore, a change on the papal throne does not break the continuity of that mission. The fact that Francis took over rather than rejected the unfinished document of the previous pope is a strong evidence that he seriously treats the unity and continuity of the mission, the unity that is deeper than individual theological differences. The way the text was edited, on the other hand, the presence of so clearly visible “stitches”, may as well demonstrate that a deep understanding for the unity of the mission does not necessarily mean ignoring or hiding the differences, even significant ones, in the perception of fundamental doctrinal issues. Moreover, it has to be borne in mind that the “stitches” may be confusing, i.e. they may not precisely reflect the actual authorship of individual passages. On the other hand, they clearly reflect the complex structure of faith.

Structure of Faith: Listening and Seeing; Life and Knowledge

The motifs that can be ascribed to Benedict and those we are likely to associate with Francis seem to be distinguished by their reference to the light and voice. Faith as vision and, symmetrically, the light of faith, is the favourite image of faith used by Benedict. Faith as listening, on the other hand, seems to be a leitmotif of Francis's theology. This distinction should be regarded as hypothetical and rather blurred, however, it is interesting because each of those images reveals a different aspect of faith.

If we agree on the above classification, we may then conclude that the title of the encyclical seems to come from Benedict. In the body of the text, however, when listening and seeing are referred to together, it is usually listening that is mentioned first. That would point to a priority given to listening as the image of faith in the encyclical. Let us briefly analyze what each of the motifs has to say about faith.

Faith as light and vision is related to reason. Faith is the light which helps us to better see reality. It is thanks to faith that we can get to know God, understand ourselves, and have a deeper perception of the world around us. Faith is the light which illuminates the paths of our lives. Yet, at the same time, that particular aspect of faith became a subject of criticism and multiple allegations worded in recent centuries. The allegations target the very essence of faith perceived as light, claiming that faith is, in fact, darkness rather than light. Paragraphs 2-4 of LF are devoted to the above-described perception of faith and its modern criticism. Defending faith against the claims calling it darkness seems to be the fundamental task of modern apologetics.

Faith as listening is related to life. There is a distinction to be made, however: listening may mean learning, listening to the teaching, but it may also mean listening to a call and a promise. And thus we come to another distinction which seems to be even more significant. In LF, faith is, on the one hand, considered as knowledge: here the metaphor of light is dominating, but there is also the presence of the word that teaches. On the other hand, faith is regarded as listening to a call

and a promise. In the perspective of the latter, faith means obedience to a call, an obedience which is expressed in following the call.² Abraham can be regarded as a model of such faith, and, describing faith, LF refers to his story. Abraham's obedience does not come as a result of prior knowledge, it is not a decision taken after an analysis of the content of the call and a thorough discernment of who its author is: it is a response of the heart. "Abraham does not see God, but he hears his voice" (LF 8). Likewise, believing in the promise which comes with the call does not stem from knowledge. It is founded on trust which sprouts in the human heart. „Faith is our response to a word which engages us personally, to a «Thou» who calls us by name" (LF 8). Thus, Abraham first of all recognizes his own name: it is he, not anyone else, who has been called. He realizes that God's call is directed to him. That God does not speak about himself, he just calls him by name. Abraham recognizes the call as God's voice with his heart, not his mind: "In the voice which speaks to him, the patriarch recognizes a profound call which was always present at the core of his being" (LF 11).

Faith is thus apprehended within the logic of interpersonal relation, a relation which involves the recognition of the calling voice as the voice of God, yet it is not based on knowledge. Such faith is a history, it takes place in time, just like human life and human relationships of which this life is made. Francis strongly emphasizes the fundamental significance of that aspect of faith: faith has a temporal structure, it is a "journey through history" (see the entire LF 10). Though Francis does not use the word "diachrony", it fits perfectly well in this context: the structure of faith is diachronic. On the other hand, though the process of rational cognition also takes place in time, its effect, knowledge, is synchronic: it involves capturing the object of cognition in thoughts by means of permanent forms of notions and sentences. Therefore, talking about faith which is a response to a call and a trust in a promise simply means telling a life story. Telling a story is not a raw material which needs further intellectual processing, but the most appropriate way of talking about faith. Francis writes: „if we want to understand what faith is, we need to follow the route it has taken" (LF 8).³

² Theology regards that distinction as the rational and the volitional aspects of faith. The classical distinction is usually based on an assumption that the two aspects are equivalent, or the volitional aspect is subordinated to the rational one. It also presumes that the two aspects of faith can be theologically described, and in their description, priority is given to the notional language. Francis, as will be demonstrated later, gives priority to faith understood as following a call, pointing out that that aspect of faith does not lend itself to rational cognition, nor can it be described in a language of abstract notions. On the other hand, in para 47 of "The Reciprocity Between Faith and Sacraments in the Sacramental Economy", a document of the International Theological Commission published in 2020, faith is described by means of the notions of classical theology, and that description seems to be regarded as the most suitable. The entire document seems to be totally foreign to Francis's theology. International Theological Commission, *The Reciprocity Between Faith and Sacraments in the Sacramental Economy*, Vatican, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20200303_reciprocita-fede-sacramenti_en.html [1 VII 2020].

³ The Spanish text refers to "telling" about the routes of the believers, not to "following" them: „Por eso, si queremos entender lo que es la fe, tenemos que narrar su recorrido, el camino de los hombres creyentes". Similarly, in German: "Darum müssen wir, wenn wir verstehen wollen, was

Within that paradigm of describing faith, Francis stresses that faith means remembrance. He does not mean the memory of knowledge that has been acquired, but remembering the words of a call and a promise. Therefore, faith is also *memoria futuri*, remembrance of the future, i.e. the memory of a promise. The remembrance of the future provides a strong support, it enables taking actions which rely on the promise alone (see LF 9), however, the following comment might be added: *memoria futuri*, being a sole trust, is entirely different from anticipations and forecasts. Neither does it offer an idea of what the fulfillment of the promise will look like.

Faith, therefore, is light and seeing in the light, and at the same time it is following the voice of a call, the voice recognized by the longing of the heart. Perhaps the “stitches” mentioned before do not mean the recognition of pluralism within the unity of the Tradition, but they point to something significant in relation to faith itself. They may as well demonstrate that the different concepts: faith as light and vision, faith as voice and listening, and above all, faith as knowledge and faith as following a call, describe a complex structure of one and the same faith. Faith not only shapes our ability to get to know reality, but also, and most importantly, it transfigures the human heart, as understood in the biblical sense, and it takes place in the heart of the history of human life.

The biblical expression “heart of man” is prior to the distinctions between reason and emotions, intellect and senses, or body and soul. Certainly, the Greek perception of the human being as a reasonable creature also offers a potential for a holistic approach, an approach that is prior to the above mentioned distinctions. Yet, throughout the ages, philosophical tradition has regarded the heart as one of the many elements in the structure of the human being. That is probably the reason why the encyclical grants such a privileged position to the biblical “heart” and the description of faith that takes a “shortcut” and reaches directly to the heart and life of a person, leaving out the long journey through Greek philosophy. The starting point of such description is human life which takes place in time, in the body, in relations with others, in the world, and which is prior to knowledge. Knowledge also belongs to human life, but human life is not subordinated to knowledge. The difference in perspectives is irreducible: Greek tradition looks at the spiritual side of the human being, while the Old Testament perceives the human being through the body. In today’s epoch,⁴ the perception of the human being through their spiritual side seems to be increasingly charged with what Francis refers to as “gnosis”. He, therefore, grants priority to the Old Testamental perspective, which, however, does not mean rejection of the Greek perspective and its legacy. It means, though, a reversal of hierarchies: the biblical perspective is the one to impose its paradigm.

der Glaube ist, seinen Verlauf beschreiben”, and Polish: „jeśli chcemy zrozumieć, czym jest wiara, powinniśmy opowiedzieć jej historię, drogę ludzi wierzących”.

⁴ Francis often refers to our „epoch”. We further develop the theme in the subchapters “Theology and Culture” and “Theology and Science”.

There are two instances of synthesis in the text of the encyclical, with an attempt to reconcile the two perspectives of faith in one image. One of the images shows faith as a light in the perspective of life that takes place in time, an ongoing journey:

Faith, received from God as a supernatural gift, becomes a light for our way, guiding our journey through time. On the one hand, it is a light coming from the past, the light of the foundational memory of the life of Jesus which revealed his perfectly trustworthy love, a love capable of triumphing over death. Yet since Christ has risen and draws us beyond death, faith is also a light coming from the future and opening before us vast horizons (LF 4).

Here, the image of the light is inscribed in the structure of the journey of life, which is a response to a call and an act of trust in a promise. That structure is explicitly related to Jesus Christ: the light from the past is the light of the “foundational memory.” The light of memory is not merely knowledge, but it’s the memory of a proclamation: memory which does not mean storing objects in an archive or museum,⁵ but which involves a constant call.⁶ The light from the future, on the other hand, illuminates the promise, the “vast horizons”. It can be defined as *memoria futuri*. Thus, each of the lights mentioned in the passage refers to far more than rational knowledge.

The other synthetic description of faith which seems of great importance is the passage: “faith itself possesses a sacramental structure” (LF 40). Francis immediately proceeds to its explanation: “The awakening of faith is linked to the dawning of a new sacramental sense in our lives as human beings and as Christians, in which visible and material realities are seen to point beyond themselves to the mystery of the eternal” (LF 40).

The above statement becomes fully comprehensible in the light of the previous passage which presents an outline of Francis’s theology of sacraments. A sacrament engages “the entire person, body and spirit, interior life and relationships with others” (LF 40).⁷

We have briefly presented two dimensions of faith described in LF. It needs to be strongly emphasized that it is two dimensions of the same faith that are referred to, and not two types of faith which could exist separately. They reveal the inner structure of one faith. Inscribing the metaphor of light in the image of faith as a journey shows that, as far as the structure of faith is concerned, LF gives primacy to a response, to taking the first step and persevering on the journey, that is to faith understood as listening to a call and a promise. It is not only a primacy in the sense of the beginning of faith, the starting point, it also means a solid foundation, a fundamental dimension of faith which shapes the entire human life taking place in time. Likewise, the statement about the sacramental structure of faith implies that

⁵ For the metaphor of a museum see EG 83, 95, 234.

⁶ It is thus a proclamation, or a kerygma. See the subchapter “Kerygma and Theology”.

⁷ As with a number of other issues, we can only signal that Francis’s theological reflection on sacraments is a comprehensive research problem.

faith engages and transforms a person as a whole, all the aspects and dimensions of their life. That transformation means opening of human existence to transcendence, “the mystery of the eternal” (LF 40).

Faith and Theology (LF 36)

There is only one subchapter in the encyclical that is devoted to theology (LF 36). The modest size of the subchapter and the word order in its title already suggest that theology is not central to the life of faith. The initial words, “Since faith is a light (...)” (LF 36) quite accurately indicate the place of theology in the life of faith: in LF, theology is considered in relation to faith perceived as light, i.e. to faith as knowledge. Such a statement might seem obvious, or even trivial, but we need to bear in mind the above presented analyses, demonstrating that what Francis considers as fundamental to faith is a response to a call, a response and obedience that are not an effect of cognition, of acquiring knowledge, but of an interpersonal encounter. Faith in its core is a response of the heart, entrusting of desire, a trust built on the faithfulness of God.

Let us, therefore, ask a question: does it mean that, according to Francis, theology has little to say about faith perceived as a promise and a call? Does theology which, by its very nature, consists in rational cognition, only has a say when a person has responded to the call of faith and needs help on his or her journey? We believe that the answer is positive. Francis acknowledges that theological cognition is unable to illuminate the intimate dialogue, where God calls and promises, while a human being recognizes the call with the longing of his or her heart and responds to it. The very heart of faith, i.e. listening and responding to a call and *memoria futuri*, the memory of a promise, is totally impenetrable to theology. The impenetrability is irremovable, since it is caused by the very nature of that dimension of faith. For faith, which is an intimate relation of a human being to God, a relation happening in time, in life, remains beyond reach of any knowledge, and what is more, it remains beyond reach of an outside look. Francis repeatedly writes about the mysterious work of grace. He refers to it as the mystery of the intimate relation of God to the human being, which inevitably remains beyond reach of human knowledge or judgement,⁸ thus also beyond reach of theology which, together with philosophy, is regarded as an “area of knowledge” (see EG 242).

Such a description of the relationship between faith and theology leads to another conclusion: it is faith, not theology, that has an exceptional power to reach God, faith is able to touch God. Francis writes that “In faith, we can touch him” (LF 31), and he recalls Jesus’s encounter with the women suffering from

⁸ E.g. “attraction of God’s saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person” (EG 44); „each person’s situation before God and their life in grace are mysteries which no one can fully know from without” (EG 172).

hemorrhages and the comment by St Augustine.⁹ Likewise, in the final prayer addressed to Mary, Francis asks her to help us, “that we may touch him in faith” (LF 60). Theology, on the other hand, does not possess that power. Theology perceived as intellectual work is unable to touch God. Writing about theology, Francis uses the passive voice „Theology thus demands the humility to be “touched” by God, admitting its own limitations before the mystery” (LF 36). In EG as well, Francis stresses that theology is not above faith, since “faith itself (...) elevates us to the mystery transcending nature and human intelligence” (EG 242).

Further in LF, we read that theology „must work humbly to protect and deepen the faith of everyone, especially ordinary believers” (LF 36).¹⁰ Here again, the call for humility in pursuing theology resonates very strongly. The humble work of protection and deepening of faith can be only undertaken by humble theology.¹¹ In the light of the analyses presented above, we can specify it even further: the humility of theology means that a theologian guards himself against any thought that he or she might know more about God than a simple believer. Such understanding of humility gives rise to theology that serves the faith of the simplest; theology that does not teach from above, but accompanies and supports.

Thus, theology remains the servant of faith, and it is only legitimate when it helps faith. As a servant, it is obliged to be humble towards faith. The service takes place within the Church. The ecclesial dimension of faith means that also for theology, the ecclesial dimension is part of its very essence rather than an additional element coming from outside.

⁹ “Saint Augustine, commenting on the account of the woman suffering from haemorrhages who touched Jesus and was cured (cf. Lk 8:45-46), says: “To touch him with our hearts: that is what it means to believe” (LF 31).

¹⁰ The English translation slightly changes the connotation of this sentence. The Spanish version, “se ocupe humildemente de custodiar y profundizar la fe de todos, especialmente la de los sencillos”, refers to “simple people”, while the Polish translation, “teologia ma służyć wierze chrześcijan, pokornie strzec i pogłębiać wiarę wszystkich, zwłaszcza ludzi najprostszych”, to “the simplest people”.

¹¹ An association with „pensiero debole”, and idea developed by G. Vattimo, may come to mind. The simple association, however, is not accurate, since the idea of “humble theology” emerges from the understanding of the relation between theology and faith, and it is not analogous to “pensiero debole”. If a comparison were to be made, it would immediately show a strong contrast between the two ideas: humble theology is by no means weak thinking, which is uprooted and which acknowledges its inability to find any foundations. On the contrary, thanks to its humility and a living relation with faith, such theology has a chance to become a new “pensiero forte”, a powerful intellectual response to the confusion of modern times and the ideas of post-modernism and nihilism. In her article, Judith Gruber analyzes EG to find elements for the construction of what she calls “kenotic theology” which seems to realize the post-modernist postulates of weak thinking, yet it seeks to justify its cause through the faith in the kenosis of the Son of God. At the end of the article, however, Gruber admits that certain passages in EG go against the idea of kenotic theology. J. Gruber J., *The Lord, your God, is in your Midst* (EG 4): *Evangelii Gaudium – Francis’s Call for a Kenotic Theology*, in: *Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism. “Evangelii Gaudium” and the Papal Agenda*, edited by G. Mannion, Cambridge 2017, pp. 55-74.

Theology and Knowledge of God

As we have already seen, theology does not have the same ability of getting to know God as faith. Let us have a closer look at what Francis writes about the ability of theology to know God. He claims that “theology is more than simply an effort of human reason to analyze and understand, along the lines of the experimental sciences. God cannot be reduced to an object. He is a subject who makes himself known and perceived in an interpersonal relationship” (LF 36).

The juxtaposition of knowing God and the knowledge that is typical of the experimental sciences is obvious and requires no further comment. One may have a reason to think, however, that the passage contains a more comprehensive reservation. The claim that “God cannot be reduced to an object” seems to go beyond the division between the experimental and other sciences. It may as well refer to any form of rational cognition. In an act of cognition, human mind objectifies what it explores. The very act of cognition means objectification. The distinction between rational cognition, whose nature is to objectify, and the “knowing” which characterizes interpersonal relationships, has been thoroughly analyzed by the philosophy of dialogue, with E. Levinas as its most prominent representative. His entire work is devoted to that very subject. Levinas demonstrates that all that happens in a relationship with the Other is prior and more fundamental than rational cognition. It seems that in the above quoted passage, Francis refers to Levinas’s thought.

Since God is a subject, the knowledge of God means entering in an interpersonal relation, not cognition of an object. Thus, in the subsequent sentences of LF 36, the word “knowledge” in relation to God should be interpreted as establishing a relation. As the first movement of such interpretation, we should probably embrace the biblical, and particularly Old Testamental, meaning of the word “to know”. It is commonly accepted that in the Old Testament, the word “to know” has a different connotation than knowledge in Greek culture. Therefore, “a deeper knowledge of God” (LF 36) cannot simply refer to a deeper level of cognition. Instead, it recalls Abraham and his listening to the voice of a call and a promise. Similarly, “right faith” does not refer to an objective model that could be a benchmark for the “correctness” of faith, but it points to faith which involves the discernment of heart and the obedience to a call.

If theology as an effort of rational mind is unable to ensure the highest knowledge of God, we must then thoroughly reconsider the way in which theological treatises “On God” ought to be written. They definitely must not have the structure of a systematic discourse with God as its object. It is worth bearing in mind that Francis rejects an idea of theology which would be “a monolithic body of doctrine” (see EG 40).

The Kerygma and Theology

One of the most passionate passages of EG is devoted to the kerygma. It states: “The kerygma is trinitarian. The fire of the Spirit is given in the form of tongues and leads us to believe in Jesus Christ who, by his death and resurrection, reveals and communicates to us the Father’s infinite mercy” (EG 164).

Francis points out that the proclamation of and listening to the kerygma has its source in the proclamation of Risen Christ on the Day of Pentecost. It is the Holy Spirit who gives power to the proclamation and opens the hearts of those who listen. That is the primary, fundamental moment of the transmission of faith. Francis then warns against treating that primariness as a starting point which has to be abandoned in the process of maturing:

This first proclamation is called “first” not because it exists at the beginning and can then be forgotten or replaced by other more important things. It is first in a qualitative sense because it is the principal proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again (EG 164).

The subsequent paragraph (EG 165) in its entirety elaborates on the above sentence. There, Francis emphasizes in various ways the central position of the kerygma. Thus, all that took place on the Day of Pentecost was not just a one-time historic event, but an event which continues to be renewed in the life of the Church. Putting together the above presented Francis’s reflection on the kerygma and what he writes about faith in LF, one may claim that the moment of Pentecost, and every act of the proclamation of the kerygma which it enables, have the same dynamics as the moment when Abraham heard God’s call and responded to it. Like in the call of God and the response of Abraham, in the proclamation of and listening to the kerygma, faith is born: faith that consists in listening and responding, that becomes the story of life, or the path of exodus.

The passage devoted to the kerygma is part of the subchapter on catechesis. Since catechesis is shaped by theology, we may doubtlessly treat Francis’s instructions related to catechesis as the guidelines that also pertain to theology. Thus, theology should be pursued in such a way that it may serve the kerygma. The way Francis understands the kerygma also implies that theology and its study, necessary as it may be to prepare the proclamation, is unable to give kerygmatic power to the words. The kerygma is the word proclaimed in the power of the Spirit, a prophetic voice, the voice of God calling a human being. The relationship between the proclaimer and the listener of the kerygma, and faith which means following a call, are beyond the reach of rational theology. Neither can theology reach “higher”, above the encounter of God and a human being which happens in the proclamation of and listening to the kerygma. An extensive part of *Gaudete et Exsultate* (GE 36-46) devoted to the threat posed by gnosis, contains a warning against the perception of theology as a quest for knowledge which would surpass the kerygma in knowing God. He expresses his criticism, claiming: “Someone who wants everything to be clear and sure presumes to control God’s transcendence” (GE 41).

It has to be borne in mind, though, that in LF, Francis writes about one faith: even if he strongly insists on the primacy of faith which is life over faith understood as the knowledge of God, he does not mean two kinds of faith, but one and the same faith. The unity of faith is thus a presumption for his teaching on the kerygma and further catechesis. It is an important reminder, otherwise we might interpret Francis's teaching on the kerygma and catechesis as a reference to the familiar distinction between religion and faith.¹² If we were to apply such distinction, the proclamation of the kerygma would stand for the transmission of faith, while catechesis and theology would mean teaching religion and studying religious education. Francis presumes, however, that the entire catechesis is involved in the transmission of faith, while theology as a whole means studying in faith. The above mentioned distinction is built on a limiting perception of the kerygma, where it is reduced to the level of a "message" parallel to other kinds of messages, or to a particular form of instruction. If, on the other hand, we perceive the kerygma as an event in the Spirit, thus on another level than the transmission of knowledge or instruction, we will be able to see the unity of the kerygma, catechesis, and theology, or "see" the work of the Spirit, which pervades the entire catechetical and theological activity.

Perceiving the kerygma as the mysterious work of the Spirit protects us from yet another simplification, namely a belief that we can precisely identify the moment in a human life when the kerygma was heard and embraced. It is neither necessary, nor even possible. The wind blows wherever it pleases... From the sacramental perspective, baptism is that moment, however, no-one can see from "outside" the way in which grace works in a human heart.¹³ In his teaching, Pope Francis attaches great significance to the sacrament of baptism. An analysis of that teaching is a separate comprehensive theological challenge.

Ecclesial Nature of Theology. Theology and Magisterium

It has already been mentioned that, similarly to faith, theology has an ecclesial nature. Pope Francis repeatedly emphasizes that the study of theology is an ecclesial work by its very essence. In EG, inter alia, he directly addresses theologians: "I call on theologians to carry out this service as part of the Church's saving mission" (EG 133). The same thought can be found in the above quoted passage from LF 36, where Francis reiterates that theology is to serve the faith of Christians.

¹² The distinction has its roots in the renowned text by Barth, *Evangelium und Bildung*, first published in 1938. It is also Barth to whom theological thought owes a deeper distinction, between faith and religion.

¹³ A reference can be made to the distinction between sacramental efficacy and fruitfulness, which has long been present in the theological and catechetical tradition. It was raised, i.a., by Thomas Aquinas, see *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 69, a. 10, co, www.newadvent.org/summa/ [1 VII 2020].

In the subsequent sentence of LF 36, there is an important reference to the Magisterium of the Church.¹⁴ It stresses that the ecclesial nature of theology requires its inner connection with the Magisterium, however, the mutual relation of theology and the Magisterium seems to be perceived in a slightly different way compared to the earlier documents of the Teaching Authority of the Church. In order to present that change, we will compare the passages from LF on the mission of theology and its relation to the Magisterium with the earlier statements of the Teaching Authority of the Church on the same subject.

Thus, we read in LF that „theology must be at the service of the faith of Christians, that it must work humbly to protect and deepen the faith of everyone, especially ordinary believers” (LF 36). On the other hand, *Donum Veritatis* (further referred to as DV), instruction on the ecclesial vocation of the theologian, signed by Cardinal Ratzinger and published in 1990, states that “the Magisterium has the mission to set forth the Gospel’s teaching, guard its integrity, and thereby protect the Faith of the People of God” (DV 37).

As we compare the two passages, we can clearly see that the accents are placed differently, and there is even a change of roles. In LF, it is theology that is called upon to protect the faith of the simplest believers, while in DV, the Magisterium is summoned to protect the faith of the People of God. Another passage demonstrates that in DV, the role of theologians is seen as ancillary to the Teaching Authority of the Church, which „authentically teaches the doctrine of the Apostles. And, benefiting from the work of theologians, it refutes objections to and distortions of the faith and promotes, with the authority received from Jesus Christ, new and deeper comprehension, clarification, and application of revealed doctrine” (DV 21). Thus, the role of theology, as described here, is to help and serve the Magisterium.

In LF, however, the relation of theology to the Magisterium is outlined as follows: „because it draws its life from faith, theology cannot consider the magisterium of the Pope and the bishops in communion with him as something extrinsic, a limitation of its freedom, but rather as one of its internal, constitutive dimensions, for the magisterium ensures our contact with the primordial source and thus provides the certainty of attaining to the word of Christ in all its integrity” (LF 36). The quoted passage strongly emphasizes that theology cannot perform its ecclesial mission unless it acknowledges the Magisterium as “one of its internal, constitutive dimensions”. At the same time, the passage recognizes theology as autonomous in serving the people of God, not merely assisting the Magisterium. Thus, LF grants theology its own important role in the Church. In order to carry out their ecclesial mission, theologians have to recognize the significance of the Magisterium and embrace the Magisterium, i.e. the memory of the Church, as one of the constitutive elements of their theological reflection. Yet, since they have their own mission to perform for the people of God, it also means that they are called to independence

¹⁴ A thorough analysis of Francis’s reflection concerning the Magisterium, and particularly his frequently repeated thought that the Magisterium is the memory of the Church, is a separate research topic.

in their study and interpretation of the Magisterium. Let us reiterate: LF does not define the role of theology and theologians as ancillary to the Magisterium. It is hard not to see that such perception of the mission of theology in the Church places great responsibility on theologians.

An in-depth hermeneutical analysis of the quoted passages requires the consideration of the context and character of each of the discussed documents. It seems, however, that even a scrupulous study will not contradict the above mentioned change in the perception of the relationship between theology and the Magisterium that has taken place between *Donum Veritatis* and *Lumen Fidei*. The change can undoubtedly be associated with the presentation of faith in LF and the emphasis on faith as listening and responding, faith as a life story rather than mere knowledge.

Theology as Service on the Journey of Faith, in the World

LF 36, which has already been referred to several times, begins with the words: „Since faith is a light, it draws us into itself, inviting us to explore ever more fully the horizon which it illumines, all the better to know the object of our love. Christian theology is born of this desire” (LF 36).¹⁵ Theology is thus presented as the knowledge born of the desire of a believer’s heart. The desire of the heart is undoubtedly an essential source of theology. In the light of what has already been demonstrated, however, it becomes clear that, for Francis, theology is first and foremost the work of a believer’s mind with the purpose to serve: not primarily a selfless contemplation of the mystery of God, but rather helping brothers and sisters to better understand the paths of faith and the proclamation of the Word. The attitude of service as the principle of studying theology is at the same time the principle of its ecclesiality. We may thus draw the following conclusion: since theology does not have the same power to know God as faith, and yet its task is to help illumine the paths of faith, then its effort should be focused on this world, because that is where our life journey takes place. The objectives of theology are defined by our problems, difficulties and doubts rather than an inner voice. Therefore, the sight and the thought of a theologian should, first of all, be directed at the work of God in the world: they should look at the world and make efforts to understand the world in the light of faith. Theology can thus help to strengthen the faith of believers and respond to the need expressed by the phrase *fides quaerens intellectum*. That quest for understanding follows the hardships of life which can quench the fire of faith and sow a seed of doubt. Let us recall the passage that has already been quoted twice: „theology must be at the service of the faith of Christians, that it

¹⁵ The sentence seems to have been inspired by the first sentence of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*: „All men by nature desire to know”. The inspiration becomes more obvious when we read the following sentences, where Aristotle closely links cognition with the sense of sight and with light. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W.D. Ross, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.1.i.html> [1 VII 2020].

must work humbly to protect and deepen the faith of everyone, especially ordinary believers” (LF 36).

Here, Francis’s theological programme seems to be radically different to what can be inferred from the famous Augustine’s dialogue:

- R. What, then, do you desire to know?
 A. Those things for which I have prayed.
 R. Sum them up, briefly.
 A. I desire to know God and the soul.
 R. And nothing more?
 A. Nothing whatever.¹⁶

The programme drafted by Francis indicates that theologians should identify their main tasks “on the borderline”, wherever Christians live amidst the world and proclaim the Gospel. In *Veritatis Gaudium* (further referred to as VG), we read: „Theology and Christian culture have lived up to their mission whenever they were ready to take risks and remain faithful on the borderline” (VG 5).

Theology and Culture

The following statement is a key to understanding the mission of theology vis-a-vis culture and science, or more broadly, the relation of theology to culture and science:

It is not enough that evangelizers be concerned to reach each person, or that the Gospel be proclaimed to the cultures as a whole. A theology – and not simply a pastoral theology – which is in dialogue with other sciences and human experiences is most important for our discernment on how best to bring the Gospel message to different cultural contexts and groups (EG 133).

The statement about the need to bring the Gospel to different cultures, which carries a concept of certain “subjectivity” of culture, may be better understood if we recall two significant themes of Francis’s theology: his anthropology and the closely related reflection on the Incarnation.

Pope Francis perceives the human person as a relational being, thus a being which has its individual identity, but that identity is experienced in interpersonal relations, which are not exterior to it. What makes the foundation of a person’s identity, however, is their relation to God, which is individual, personal and mysterious, i.e. escaping any attempts at cognition or description.¹⁷ It is, first and foremost, the relation of the created being to its Creator. The very fact of being human is already an undeniable and living evidence of that relation. The Incarnation, the fullness of Revelation, has transformed and completed the relation. Francis referred to the Incarnation i.a. in his message addressed at Latin American

¹⁶ Augustine, *The Soliloquies*, I, II, 7, trans. R.E. Cleveland, Boston 1910, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/augustine-the-soliloquies> [1 VII 2020].

¹⁷ Thus Francis goes beyond and above the dichotomy of individual substance vs product of social relations.

theologians: “The questions of our people, their suffering, their battles, their dreams, their trials, their worries possess an interpretational value that we cannot ignore if we want to take the principle of the Incarnation seriously” (VG 5).

He later quoted the above text in *Veritatis Gaudium* 5. Such perception of the Incarnation means the adoption of certain understanding of the Incarnation that was present among the Church Fathers. It is referred to in a document of the International Theological Commission. It essentially involves a recognition that the “incarnation of the Logos affects the whole human nature”.¹⁸

The perception of the human person as a relational being means that the phrase “the whole human nature” also encompasses human history in its every aspect, thus the individual history of every human life, as well as cultures and their histories. It has all been embraced by the mystery of Incarnation. Therefore, carrying out its evangelizing mission, the Church in its own way participates in the mystery of redemption that was accomplished through the Incarnation. Such understanding of the Incarnation and the mission of the Church leads Francis to an important conclusion concerning the way of proclaiming the Gospel and pursuing theology:

When certain categories of reason and the sciences are taken up into the proclamation of the message, these categories then become tools of evangelization; water is changed into wine. Whatever is taken up is not just redeemed, but becomes an instrument of the Spirit for enlightening and renewing the world (EG 132).

Let us reiterate: evangelizing means the participation of the Church in the act of redemption. The evangelizing work involves the use of human categories of thinking. The redeeming power of the Incarnation also embraces that use, or the acceptance in the Church – not only by the Magisterium but also by theology or the practice of the Church – of the successive ideas and ways of thinking which have emerged in the course of history.

It is in employing the successive categories of thinking in the service of evangelization that Francis sees an irreplaceable role of theology. Let us consider the stipulation in EG 133: “and not simply a pastoral theology”, whereby the emphasis, the very centre of theology is shifted. Studies of cultures and epochs, attempts to understand them in the light of faith, are now among its main tasks.¹⁹ It is a service

¹⁸ International Theological Commission, *Select Questions on the Theology of God the Redeemer*, Part IV, C 46: „In agreement with certain patristic writers (including Irenaeus and Athanasius, as mentioned in Part III above) it may be affirmed that even though there can be no question of a “collective incarnation”, the incarnation of the Logos affects the whole of human nature”. International Theological Commission, *Select Questions on the Theology of God the Redeemer*, Vatican, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1995_tologia-redenzione_en.html [1 VII 2020].

¹⁹ Let us briefly outline how Francis diagnoses the present situation. He claims that „today we are not only living in a time of changes but are experiencing a true epochal shift” (VG 3). It has to be noticed that he does not use the word “epoch” as a weak metaphor of a certain period in the history, but he gives it a strong meaning of an age that possesses a clear and persistent “peculiar character”. See EG 224, where he quotes R. Guardini.

and help offered to believers, in which theology cannot be replaced. At the same time, it is its contribution to the work of evangelization.

The principle of incarnation seems to clearly indicate that theology does its work according to human measure, acting in time and place. The above statement, however, needs further reflection. Faith as an intimate relationship with God has a most personal character: it is a history taking place in a given time and place, within a given culture, yet, remaining impenetrable to the outside view, it transcends all determinants. Theology, on the other hand, is human work. It is a science among other sciences (see EG 133). Thus, theology is cultivated within a culture and epoch. The power of faith which transcends all determinants shapes theology, giving it a dimension of transcendence, however, every sentence written by a theologian will always be a sentence existing within its language, culture and epoch.

The fact that theology functions within a given time and epoch is not its limitation or flaw, but something that fully corresponds to its mission. After all, the mission of theology lies in service to actual people. Thus, the language of theology should not be ashamed of its relatedness to the time, place and culture.²⁰ Only a theology that consciously accepts its own circumstances will be able to fulfil the mission of which Francis spoke so clearly to Latin American theologians: “That is why it is the main task of the theologian to discern, to ponder: what does it mean to be Christian today, «in the here and now»?”²¹

The above statements lead to a radical conclusion that in theological thinking, every generation should start anew.²² That thinking has to be built on the Tradition and traditions, rooted in the memory of the Church, yet, it has to be independent thinking, developed within our times: our epoch and culture. At the same time, placing theology within culture provokes two interrelated questions: about the universality and the critical function of theology vis-à-vis culture. It seems that the answer to both questions can be sought in the relationship between theology and faith described above. Only faith, which is an intimate relation of a human being to God, inaccessible to the outside view, is both transcendent to time and place and universal. No form of theology, no sentence written by a theologian can claim its universality. Building on the above statement, one can attempt to formulate a preliminary answer to the second question. The mission of theology definitely includes a critical review of culture. However, since theology exists within culture, it cannot perform its critical function as if its point of view were external to culture, objectively grounded in a timeless formula. The only possible footing for criticism, the only transcendence vis-à-vis culture is offered by faith, which outgrows theology.

²⁰ In his documents, Francis repeatedly uses phrases taken from the different spheres of today’s language.

²¹ *Video Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in an International Theological Congress Held at the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina*, Buenos Aires, 1-3 IX 2015, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150903_videomessaggio-teologia-buenos-aires.html [1 VII 2020].

²² “Every form of authentic evangelization is always «new»” (EG 11). And indeed, theology is “authentic evangelization”.

Theology and Science

Francis steps far beyond the perspective of conflict between faith and science. He recalls the main ideas from *Fides and Ratio* and points to a significant and positive role of faith in the work of a scientist. He writes: “The gaze of science thus benefits from faith”, and soon afterwards: “Faith awakens the critical sense”; “faith broadens the horizons of reason” (LF 34). However, he does not mention any special role of theology. His view of the relationship between theology and science can be inferred from the following text:

Whenever the sciences – rigorously focused on their specific field of inquiry – arrive at a conclusion which reason cannot refute, faith does not contradict it. Neither can believers claim that a scientific opinion which is attractive but not sufficiently verified has the same weight as a dogma of faith. (EG 243)

There is no direct reference to theology in the above quoted passage, yet, it seems to lead to a conclusion that theology should keep a twofold distance: neither discuss the results of scientific research on the level of science, nor sanction and absorb them in its own thinking. A question may be asked to what extent theology should be subject to criticism from the part of science. Francis does not suggest it anywhere. The acknowledgement of well documented results of scientific research does not mean subjecting theology to criticism based on scientific criteria. On the other hand, if faith awakens the critical sense, then theology should look critically at the opinions that are inferred from the results of scientific research when they go beyond the strict framework of the subject and method of research.

Theology in a Dialogue

Francis repeatedly refers to dialogue in various contexts. He stresses that dialogue is an inalienable element in the study of theology, and he presents his idea of that dialogue. Two statements are of utmost importance if we want to understand Francis's idea of dialogue. The first, “Dialogue is much more than the communication of a truth” (EG 142) initiates the subchapter devoted to preaching. The other appears in *Veritatis Gaudium*. It claims that among four basic criteria for the renewal of theological studies, there is „wide-ranging dialogue, not as a mere tactical approach, but as an intrinsic requirement for experiencing in community the joy of the Truth and appreciating more fully its meaning and practical implications” (VG 4b). Let us also recall an already quoted sentence, stating that „A theology – and not simply a pastoral theology – which is in dialogue with other sciences and human experiences is most important for our discernment on how best to bring the Gospel message” (EG 133).

In the first two of quoted passages, one idea comes up in different contexts: the truth is a communal experience, it emerges as a fruit of dialogue²³. Neither the

²³ The statement transposes one of the main theses of the philosophy of dialogue into theology. See E. Levinas, *Discourse and Ethics*, in: E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis, Pittsburgh 1969, pp. 76-81.

proclamation of the Word in a homily, which is addressed at the believers, nor an encounter outside the strict context of an ecclesial community, can go in one direction. It is only in an experience of meeting and dialogue that the truth is “born”.

Such understanding of the deep significance of dialogue, reinforced by the clause that it is not a “mere tactical approach”, is only possible on the basis of a presumption that God’s grace is already at work in people with whom we engage in dialogue and in their works, i.e. science and culture. Without that presumption, there is no way to validate the theological weight of the above statements by Francis. Consequently, without that presumption, dialogue could never be real. Unless we acknowledge the prior work of God’s grace in the partners of dialogue, there are no grounds to believe in the power of such dialogue. The partners of a “tactical dialogue” would be treated as a mere “object” of evangelization, and any possible talks would be carried out as tactical operations wholly subordinated to the mission understood as a unilateral communication of the message. Francis, however, writes that “Evangelization also involves the path of dialogue” (EG 238). Thus, dialogue itself, with its own logic, openness and acceptance of the interlocutor as a partner who also has something to tell us, is the path of evangelization. In that way, Francis points that the dichotomy: either dialogue, or evangelization, is false by nature. It testifies to a profound subtlety of his thought, which maintains the kerygmatic, proclaiming dimension of evangelization, yet, at the same time, it finds a place for authentic dialogue.

Conclusion

In this article, we first presented the foundation of Francis’s concept of theology, i.e. his understanding of faith, and the relation of theology to faith which is based on that understanding. We then proceeded to a demonstration that, according to Francis, theology has only limited competences in what seems to be its main task, i.e. the knowledge of God. The above statement has far-reaching consequences for the perception of the nature of theology, and consequently, its structure and tasks.

It is legitimate to suppose that Francis’s concept of theology based on his description of the nature of faith, as presented above, provides an important hermeneutic key which opens new prospects for the analysis of his theological ideas. The central, or in other words, fundamental character of the issues discussed here makes each of them a potential subject of a separate study devoted to a certain aspect of Francis’s theology. The questions about faith as grace, about sacraments, anthropology, the Magisterium as the memory of the Church, the understanding of the Incarnation, about culture and epoch, about the universality of theology... each calls for an answer at least the size of a lengthy article.

A similar comment refers to the context, i.e. placing Pope Francis’s reflection on faith and theology against the background of doctrinal tradition as well as modern philosophical and theological landscape, which the article outlines only briefly. However, it seemed necessary to provide a text which would combine a brief

presentation of the foundation, i.e. the nature of faith, and the way of understanding the nature, structure and tasks of theology which builds on that foundation. It is not possible to present Francis's concept of theology without placing it in that context.

Here we would like to refer to the second part of the title: Existence Does Matter. The existential nature of Francis's theology, its immersion in human life and all its aspects that are subject to the changing of time and circumstances is, in our opinion, the most striking intellectual feature of that theology, and also the source of its immense vitality. We did not pinpoint any concrete references of Francis's theology to the 20th century existentialist philosophy. Similarly, when discussing his insistence on the dialogical character of theology, we did not study to what extent he referred to the philosophy of dialogue, though it seems obvious that such references are present in his texts. A thorough study of the links between Francis's theology and various strands of existentialist philosophy and the philosophy of dialogue is a separate research task, which seems both urgent and comprehensive.

A concluding remark: as we have demonstrated, Francis appreciates both the role of theology and the work of theologians. He acknowledges its independent service for the Church. Theology is a servant of faith and a helper in the work of evangelization. The appreciation of the irreplaceable role of theologians can also be seen in the documents published by Francis. They provide an abundance of work for theologians. Their texts leave vast areas of thought open to interpretation. They are ambivalent, yet their ambivalence does not mean weakness of thought, but rather opening up to new perspectives.

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Keywords: Pope Francis, faith, theology, *Lumen Fidei*, culture, Magisterium of the Church, existentialism

Słowa kluczowe: papież Franciszek, wiara, teologia, *Lumen fidei*, kultura, Magisterium Kościoła, egzystencjalizm