

MISSIONARY. EXISTENTIAL. SPIRITUAL. PERSPECTIVES FOR THE WORK OF THE CHURCH AFTER THE PANDEMIC¹

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Abstract: This article explores opportunities for Church action after the pandemic, from three different perspectives: missionary, anthropological and spiritual. The missionary perspective; using an existential-analytical approach, should contribute to the Church becoming less focused on herself and more committed to in its mission for the good life. From an anthropological perspective, Church work is directed to the human being as the image of God and pleads for anthropological aspects to be taken into account in the shaping of Church practice. With the spiritual perspective, the plea is made for Church activity after the pandemic to open up spaces in which human beings, in the experience of their worthiness to love, understand and learn to love themselves without measure and without conditions.

Keywords: church, missionary, existential, spiritual, pandemic, Missio Dei, Pope Francis, anthropological, logotherapy and existential analysis.

In recent years, the term ‘crisis’ has become synonymous with the Church, without suspecting that things can get even worse, and that the world in which the Church lives is also being overrun by crises caused by an epidemic. The pandemic has shown the world how fragile human life is, and also that the single means of salvation, when facing such extreme experiences – both theologically and spiritually speaking - is love of³ one’s neighbour. Every era has its crises that have to be overcome and these crises manifest themselves in various ways.

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³ The manifestation of charity as humanity, solidarity, consideration, etc.

The Church has never been spared from the crises of the world and humanity, nor is it today. The crises (including the crisis of the pandemic) facing humanity affect the Church in two ways: 1. the crises do not stop at the Church door; their effects are also felt within the Church. 2. the crises can be interpreted as a call to action for the Church. Both in the pandemic and for the time following, the question arises as to what resources the Church can draw on for it to not deteriorate further, but remain active in a creative and healing way, as an advocate of the ‘good life’.

Three perspectives that can be of significance for the Church’s work after the pandemic are discussed below. In the first perspective, in an existential approach, the question of mission is presented. Secondly, the significance of the anthropological perspective is explained. Lastly, the spiritual perspective rounds off the discussion.

Missionary perspective

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis declares himself a fan of a “dented” Church that is “wounded and soiled because it has gone out into the streets” and not of a “sick” Church “which, because of its closedness and its comfort, clings to its own certainties”. (EG 49) For the pontiff, a Church that goes out into the world is a missionary Church, one that cannot become sick because it is always concerned with the with its own success, in the sense of its constituent (missionary) mandate and thus of its essence. The integral understanding of mission, which has crystallized step- by-step since the Second Vatican Council, and whose origin is the Trinitarian dynamic of love, brings about a missionary perspective for the work of the Church, even after the pandemic. If mission is understood as the existential *raison d’être* of the Church, and if church life takes place within a mission that “goes beyond-itself”, mission can also be understood as a self-transcendence of Church existence that protects the Church from becoming sick. Mission, in this act of going beyond itself, can be understood as the Church’s self-healing power that protects it from stagnation and hyper-reflection on its own sensibilities. If the Church loses sight of mission, and instead is only inward-looking, it starts on an existential slippery slope of self-centredness and sets itself up to be driven by purpose, not love for one’s neighbour. Self-promotion or recruitment, stagnating or mourning the its lost power, as well as attempts to convert people, are manifestations of a Church that is concerned only with itself, one living contrary to its missionary nature.

Pope Francis calls this self-centredness of the Church the source of evil of times past: “When the Church does not go out of herself [is not missionary] to proclaim the Gospel, she circles around herself. Then she becomes sick. The evils that developed in church institutions over time have their root in this self-centredness.”⁴ Being a Church, in inference to mission, means always pointing beyond herself to something that is not herself. Stephen Bevans, one of the best-known missiologists of our time, formulates how in this logic, Church and mission relate to one another:

“The church does not so much have a mission as that the mission has a church. The church is not about itself; it is about the Reign of God that is preached, served, and witnessed to, and this makes all the difference.”⁵

In his argument that it is not the Church that has a mission, but the mission (the *Missio Dei*) that has a Church, Bevans refers to the Decree on Mission of Vatican Council II, *Ad gentes*. In AG 2, the Decree on Mission defines mission as the essence of the Church. From this, the mission of the Church, its orientation, its purpose, can be developed.

The mission of the Church is established theologically through its missionary nature: In the trinitarian anchoring of the missionary essence, it becomes apparent that this essence is founded in the love dynamic of the Trinity; from this community of love, the creation-theological anchoring of the missionary essence takes place, whereby the addressees of the *Missio Dei* come into focus. The addressees of the divine project, humanity and the whole of Creation, become the addressees of the Church. The soteriological anchoring of the missionary nature of the Church points to the completion of Creation in a constant process of maturing into Christ.

The missionary nature of the church is about God’s self-communication, which is first revealed in Creation, then culminates in the incarnation of the Word and finally takes place in the resurrection of Christ. These moments of salvation history, represent the eventfulness of God’s creative and saving love for human beings, and at the same time establish themselves as the criteriology

⁴ Kardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Erzbischof von Buenos Aires/Argentinien im Prekonklave: <http://www.kath.net/news/40706>, Online Zugang: 22.05.2018.

⁵ Stephen Bevans, *The mission has a church, the mission has a ministers. Thinking Missiologically about Ministry and the Shortage of Priest*, in: *Compass* 3 (3/2009) 3, 3-14, 3.

of the missionary paradigm of being a Church that conforms to its nature.⁶ This missionary perspective has far-reaching consequences for Church practice, but at the same time frees it from a pathogenic self-centredness. A centering on the missionary perspective of Church activity also has a surprising yield, namely, it stabilizes the Church and makes it a socially relevant actor.

In the context of these practical ecclesiological reflections on the understanding of mission, the question, and thus also the struggle about what is mission, is put into perspective. Is charitable activity a missionary practice, or is it rather the proclamation the real mission? In the proclamation (martyria) “that mystery is revealed which man and the life of man basically always already is ... the history of the unswervingly faithful God (Dt 32:4) with every man”⁷ (per intentionem). This mystagogical gesture of proclamation of ecclesial as well as of Jesuan practice always also has (per effectum) a healing character, for it proclaims the salvation-land of the world.⁸ Such per effectum healing words that transform the heart are what Pope Francis desires not least of all ~~from the~~ sermons, but from all proclamation (EG 142-144).

But the reverse is also true. The healing actions of Jesus per intentionem in the Gospels are numerous. It is diakonia. The poor, the sick, the marginalized, the discriminated, are healed by him. In following the healing Christ, it is the mission of the Church to be an “advocate of the oppressed and damaged life”⁹. In healing, it could be said, God’s love for people becomes tangible. The Church’s turning to the poor and oppressed (frightened) is healing because it creates space for the experience of God’s love for people. The works of mercy (Mt 25) thus belong per intentionem to the healing actions of the Church, but per effectum they also contribute to the fact that man, being healed, becomes capable of more love and (re)discovers the meaning of life.¹⁰

⁶ Klara Csiszar, *Mission mit dem Lehramt integral (neu) denken*, in: *Verbum SVD* 57 (3-4/2016), 292–308, 295.

⁷ Peter Neuner / Paul. M Zulehner, *Dein Reich komme. Eine praktische Lehre von der Kirche*, Ostfildern 2013, 40.

⁸ *Ibid.* 45.

⁹ *Ibid.* 50.

¹⁰ Klara Csiszar, *Kirche in Liebesdynamik. Integrales Missionsverständnis mit praktischen Konsequenzen*, in: Klara Csiszar (Hg), *Missio-Logos. Beiträge zu einem integralen Missionskonzept einer Kirche bei den Menschen*, Regensburg 2021, 121-122.

Anthropological perspective

In light of the missionary perspective as presented above, it becomes apparent that the work of the Church after the pandemic also needs an anthropological perspective as a complement to the common and up until now well-researched social perspectives. In recent decades, the Church, and also theology, have made great efforts to explore the sociological, but also socio-critical context in which human beings live. In addition to a theologically common theory of the world¹¹, the theory of the human being and thus the anthropological perspective, offers a better understanding of the shapers of the context, the addressees as well as the actors of Church practice.

Consciously or unconsciously, Church practice is shaped by images of man. What Church actors think of people shapes the form of their practice. Wrong images of man lead to wrong dealings with people and to irrelevant Church practices. For example, it would be fatal to have an image of human beings that ignores the freedom of the human being's will and thus his or her spiritual abilities; such as the ability to love, the ability to act and the ability to suffer. A Church practice will be convincing if it works with the existentially available but inactive or partially active abilities.

The pandemic has confronted individuals and humanity as a whole - but especially Western societies - with suffering unprecedented in its scale and impact in recent contemporary history. As a crisis of life, the pandemic has put being human to the test, and tested its capacity for solidarity, consideration for others and cohesion. This time of crisis has shown how devotion, as the primary capacity of human existence, is the only constructive way to endure suffering and even to shape it according to his inner strength. The Viennese psychiatrist and philosopher Viktor Frankl explains what this primary capacity means: "Man is not here to observe himself and to reflect himself; he is here to surrender himself, to give himself away, to surrender in recognition and love."¹² The Hungarian systematic theologian János Vik emphasizes what is important in crisis management, also with regard to good coexistence: "it is about the how of suffering" and he con-

¹¹ Matthias Sellmann, „Zuhören – Austauschen – Vorschlagen“. *Einführung in die Pastoraltheologie, Manuskript für die Vorlesung*, Bochum 2017, 23.

¹² Viktor E. Frankl, *Logotherapie und Existenzanalyse. Texte aus sechs Jahrzehnten*, Berlin-München 1994, 73.

tinues “therefore it is a reference to pastoral care (...) to assume that the suffering person here today (...) wants to make his own need for expression heard.”¹³ Vik advocates that in human border-experiences, confessional pastoral care should develop into a care of meaning that supports people in activating their very own capacity for devotion and thus contribute to a good, responsible coexistence, despite the most adverse circumstances.¹⁴

Overcoming personal crises by going beyond oneself and taking a stand on one’s own fragility in the field of good mutual coexistence is also a key moment in the concept of humanism which is a constitutive part of the reflections of the Pontifical Council for Culture, especially in view of the time after the pandemic.¹⁵ In the future, it will as well be necessary for the Church to make an important contribution to the new humanism through its work. The idea of the search for the meaning presupposes pastoral-theological reflections that focus on the spirituality of the human being and explores ways in which this can be activated, and repeatedly reactivated in the constellation of the *mysterium humanum*.

Existential analysis, according to Viktor E. Frankl, regards human beings as spiritual beings. Their capacity for self-transcendence and self-distance as based on this spirituality. From these two abilities they make use of their physical and psychological conditions to face and take up the border-experiences: “Man is not free from his conditions, but free in how he wants to behave towards them.”¹⁶ In Church practice, a space could be created in which people can work on attitude modulation, i.e. on how they can freely take a stand on external and internal conditions and events (including the pandemic) through their behavior, for their own good and for the good of others. Thanks to such small spiritually gifted steps, humanity develops in the real sense.

“What is man, the human being?” is the question Pope Francis asks in his address to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Culture in November 2021. With his question he pleads for a rediscovery of anthropology: “Today, a

¹³ János Vik, *Eine Analyse auf Existenz hin – gerade in der Corona-Krise*, in: ThPQ 169 (3/2021) 246-255, 258.

¹⁴ Ibid. 259.

¹⁵ Papst: Nicht nur Anti-Covid Pläne sondern Menschlichkeit nötig, in: <https://www.vaticannews.va/de/papst/news/2021-11/papst-franziskus-versammlung-kulturrat-humanismus-video-covid.html> Online Zugang: 24.11.2021.

¹⁶ Viktor E. Frankl, *Ärztliche Seelsorge: Grundlagen der Logotherapie und Existenzanalyse*, Wien 2005, 18.

revolution is underway - yes, a revolution - that touches the essential nodes of human existence and requires a creative effort of thought and action - it needs both. There is a structural shift in the way we understand generations, birth and death. The particularity of human beings in the totality of creation, their uniqueness in relation to others, such as animals, and even their relationship to machines, are being questioned. But we cannot always limit ourselves to denial and criticism. Rather, we are called to rethink the presence of the human being in the world in the light of the humanist tradition: as a servant of life and not as its master, as a builder of the common good with the values of solidarity and compassion.”¹⁷

The common good, solidarity and compassion build on the human experience that the capacity to love and the capacity to suffer are difficult to separate but necessary, for the good life. Every human being has these capacities, even if they are not always obviously active and functioning. In the human capacity for suffering and the capacity for love, that dimension of being of the human being is revealed, which in Viktor Frankl’s logotherapy and existential analysis - in distinction from the physical and psychological dimension - is called the spiritual dimension of the human being. In a three-dimensional view of the human being, the physis or the physical dimension of the human being - in contrast to the psychological and spiritual dimension of human existence - does not require any special explanation: All bodily phenomena can be assigned to it. Experts are more or less in agreement that the cognition (thinking) and the emotion (feeling) capabilities, which undoubtedly help to control our behaviour, are at home in the psychic area of the human being.¹⁸ Viktor Frankl, the father of logotherapy and existential analysis, distinguishes from these two human processes the third one of the psyche those processes that have to do with freedom, responsibility and value. He assigns the ability to love and the ability to suffer to this area of the human dimensions of being, because both abilities in the human being - beyond any romantic notions - are to be understood as clear products of the human being in a certain situation. “The physical is given through heredity. Mental is guided by upbringing. Spiritual, however, cannot be educated, spiritual must

¹⁷ Papst: Nicht nur Anti-Covid Pläne sondern Menschlichkeit nötig, in: <https://www.vaticannews.va/de/papst/news/2021-11/papst-franziskus-versammlung-kulturrat-humanismus-video-covid.html> Online Zugang: 24.11.2021.

¹⁸ Johanna Schechner / Heidemarie Zürner, *Krisen Bewältigen*, Vienna 2018, 39-44.

be accomplished: Spirituality is at all only in self-fulfillment, in the actuality of existence”.¹⁹

The anthropological perspective directs the view of the Church’s activities to the mystery of the human being and at the same time prevents it from thinking in an ecclesiocentric way. With the anthropological perspective, the Church refrains from placing itself at the centre and instead shapes a missionary paradigm that focuses on the God-likeness of the human being and thus on the traces of transcendence. The integral missionary paradigm sees the human being in a responsible and free relationship with his Creator and with all creatures. For the work of the Church, from the anthropological perspective, that tiny gap in which human beings can and may act responsibly, but which has not been opened, but is discovered by them as a space for free action, becomes important. The exploration of such freedom of action in the most difficult conditions of life, presupposes “humility” and is the only way “to defy nihilism and prepare²⁰ the way for humanism”.

Spiritual perspective

The spiritual perspective points to the importance of spiritual processes in the work of the Church, which can also be understood as processes of maturing into Christ. For the work of the Church, the promotion of religious-spiritual competences of human beings is also the activation of their spiritual dimension. Spiritual opportunities enable more and more people to become loving beings, in the sense of being made in the image of God.

Spiritual processes can also be understood as processes of becoming. In the struggle to find optimal answers for oneself and for one’s environment, which one is willing and able to take responsibility for, the person grows in his or her humanity. Coping with ever-increasing and more complex tragic and sorrowful aspects in life, is a permanent spiritual challenge that can only be mastered selectively, *ad personam* and *ad situationem*, and not once and for all. Spiritual processes are of existential importance in situations of uncertainty, instability and permanent struggle. In the context of human existence, spiritual processes

¹⁹ Viktor E. Frankl, *Der Wille zum Sinn*, Bern 1996, 119.

²⁰ Elisabeth Lukas, *Frankl und Gott. Erkenntnisse und Bekenntnisse eines Psychiaters*, 2019 München-Zürich-Wien, 40.

train the human being's capacity for love. A shift of attention "to the inner state of being with its inner regulations"²¹ overcomes the pathogenic self-centredness²² of the human being and develops an attitude to life "in which he feels from his innermost being like praising God with all his heart"²³. What is experienced in a spiritually mature attitude to life is that which transcends the human: "that he is held, carried and guided by God, that he is repeatedly touched with life and inspired by God, that he lives as a unique creature of God, also carries divinity within himself and is loved by God".²⁴ Through this special form of inner approval, the human being will be able to grow in his affirmation of life, despite external circumstances. The experience of God's unconditional and measureless love provokes the person to not only receive love in order to be able to develop, but to be able to love himself, unconditionally, in order to make a good life possible for himself and for all others. Through the spiritual experience of his worthiness to love and in the practice of his ability to love, the human being becomes capable of relationships. In this spiritual process, man will be able to appeal to the spiritual dimension of his human existence, precisely in moments and circumstances of suffering, guilt and death.

A spiritually mature personality can decide for love in every situation, regardless of what they are experiencing or what impulses they are currently receiving from their environment. In this mature personal attitude, the claim to be loved is preceded by a first claim, namely that of loving. God-experienced people who gift their environment with love as their spirituality develops are charismatic and beloved personalities. Not because life has spared them suffering, guilt and death, but because they want to shape life lovingly. The possibility to realize love as an advanced way of being in the world is given to one, at any time and under all circumstances. The activation of the capacity to love manifests itself individually in everyday relationships in the world and with God, but it also has a collective face in a solidarity lived together. "The whole cosmos becomes wider and deeper in value for him [the loving one], it shines in the rays of those values

²¹ Alex Lefrank, *Umwandlung in Christus. Die Dynamik des Existenzprozessen*, Würzburg 2009, 80.

²² Ibid.

²³ Rainer Kinast, *Werteorientierte Führungskultur. Theorie und praktische Umsätzeungen*, Freiburg im Br. 2021, 150.

²⁴ Ibid.

which only the lover sees; for, as is well known, love does not make one blind, but makes one see, value-sighted.”²⁵

An ecclesial practice with this perspective, in which the meaning-oriented view of concrete human life gains in importance towards a new humanism, represents a kind of “guarantee” that spiritual processes do not lead to an escape from social and political responsibility, but on the contrary, make people open to the world in their recollection of transcendence.

Opportunities for church action after the pandemic

“Help people live!”²⁶ This can be the motto of Church action in the face of a missionary perspective after the pandemic. But the missionary perspective also helps the Church to live. Being Church in the logic of the incarnation means being constantly confronted with new situations, each of which is both a task and a gift. What Incarnation “gives” to the Church is the fulfilment of its purpose. And what the Church simultaneously “gives” to a concrete situation is the possibility of realizing herself through such fulfilments of meaning. Every situation is a call for the Church to listen, to obey.²⁷ The anthropological perspective promises that the Church will analyze the context of human life, in the face of being human and in the face of existential questions. The anthropological outcome of this analysis can be taken into account by the Church in the shaping of its action, as an agent of a new humanism. If it does so, it will again become of interest to people and in demand, even as a protagonist and expert in spirituality, without striving to being of interest or in demand. The mission must provoke the Church, not because it seeks affirmation from it, but because it cannot exist any other way. In the end, the Church is there so that people can increasingly experience life in fullness and

²⁵ Viktor E. Frankl, *Ärztliche Seelsorge*, 66.

²⁶ Klara Csiszar: *Mission mit dem Lehramt integral (neu) denken*, 307-308.

²⁷ Quotation transcribed by the author. Cf. Viktor Frankl quoted by János Vik in the introduction to the 5th volume of Viktor E. Frankl’s *Collected Works*. Cf. Batthyany, Alexander/Vik, János/Biller, Karlheinz/Fizotti, Eugenio (Hg.): Viktor E. Frankl, *Gesammelte Werke. Psychotherapie, Psychiatrie und Religion. Über das Grenzgebiet zwischen Seelenheilkunde und Glauben*, Wien – Köln – Weimar 2018, 12.

create a meaningful life, so that - in the spirit of the resurrection and as we learn from the mystery of Christ - it is not death but life that has the last word.²⁸

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²⁸ Klara Csiszar, *Kirche in Liebedynamik. Integrales Missionsverständnis mit praktischen Konsequenzen*, 123.

Vik, János, *Vorbemerkungen*, Batthyany, Alexander / Vik, János / Biller, Karlheinz / Fizotti, Eugenio (Hg.): Viktor E. Frankl, *Gesammelte Werke. Psychotherapie, Psychiatrie und Religion. Über das Grenzgebiet zwischen Seelenheilkunde und Glauben*, Wien – Köln – Weimar 2018, 7-45.