

ANTI-GENDERISM AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION IN CZECH MEDIA

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Abstract: As ratification of the Istanbul Convention commenced in Czech society, the Catholic representatives attacked the document claiming it was promoting “gender ideology”. The explosive statement, in the form of a liturgical homily in September 2018, initiated a novel exchange among conservative and progressive groups within the church. By examining a follow-up debate in mainstream and Christian media, this study explores the media image of the church and establishes that while most hierarchy took a conservative stand and opposed ratification, clergy and church members supported it. It also shows that the opponents diverted the discussion in another direction; instead of addressing violence against women and children, they challenged alleged gender ideology as such. Analysis of gender and equality, fear and power, authority and hierarchy, as well as poor communication styles, reveals problematic issues in the way the church communicates its teaching and structures. The way the church presents its mission, however, is undoubtedly connected with its inner coherence and credibility; theological redefinition and system changes must therefore precede any media strategy.

Keywords: Catholic Church, gender, media, Istanbul Convention, church structures, authority, power, equality

1. Introduction

This research article explores the heated anti- ‘gender ideology’ debate in the Czech Republic within the Catholic Church following the scheduled ratification

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of the Istanbul Convention in 2018.² Up until then, church representatives had made a few statements on the topic; however, it was a homily of Petr Piřha in 2018, on Czech Statehood Day (September 28), that actually brought the issue to the attention of the general public. In the backdrop of the national cathedral and the main religious feast celebrating St. Wenceslas, the respected priest, educator and former politician Piřha delivered an unprecedented speech in Czech religious discourse. His warning against the ratification of the Convention portrayed disturbing images of children being taken from their parents, families torn apart, and opponents put into concentration camps.³ The speech caused a sensation both within the church and among the public; however, major Catholic representatives did not distance themselves from its content. Instead, they continued to espouse anti-gender rhetoric and penalized priests who disagreed with their views.

This study examines the general debate that followed in mainstream and Christian media after the event, not gender argumentation in particular. By providing a contextual exploration of the problem, this paper aims to portray an image – with regard to gender issues – that the Catholic Church provided in mainstream media after the homily against the Istanbul Convention in 2018. More specifically, it asks what important themes emerged and how they were treated. What level of competent argumentation, transparency and evidence, for instance, was included in the discussion? And what challenges do these results pose to church communication for the future?⁴

² The Istanbul Convention (2011) is the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Each country signs and ratifies separately. The Czech Republic signed the document in May 2016; ratification was expected in 2018 but has yet to be done.

³ PIŘHA, P. “Kázání v katedrále sv. Víta, Václava a Vojtěcha ve svátek sv. Václava.” 28.9.2018. <http://kapitulavsv.cz/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Mons.-Petr-Pi%C5%A5ha-K%C3%A1z%C3%A1n%C3%AD-o-sv%C3%A1tku-sv.-V%C3%A1clava-L.P.-2018.pdf> [25.1.2021]

⁴ This is an adaptation of a paper presented at the “Anti-Genderism in Central and Eastern Europe – A Question of Religion?” conference organized by the German Association for East European Studies in April 2021. Of primary concern is the Roman-Catholic Church, referred to as the Catholic Church or simply the church throughout the text. Moreover, somewhat indefinite “church” and “churches” are used without further specification.

2. Research Method and Results

With reference to practical theology methodology, an interdisciplinary approach to the topic is taken following the ‘see-judge-act’ method. First, the empirical data were gathered and analyzed qualitatively (‘see’) as it is presented in this section; the results were then evaluated normatively (‘judge’) and possible solutions were delineated (‘act’)⁵ in the following sections.

For a qualitative study, about 30 articles, statements and press releases were collected and examined with their relation to the sermon. Their styles and genres varied, from official church statements, newspaper articles, and interview material to opinion essays, or blogs. Their choice was based on the character of the media in which they were published and preference was given to mainstream media with general reach into public. The tabloid media, disinformation websites, and extremist religious websites were not examined. Social media were not consulted either apart from a few exceptions when no other sources were available. Research of social media and private commentaries would demand comprehensive study material which was not in the scope of this qualitative study and did not comply with the accessibility criteria.

Research on online material was conducted in early 2021, with both printed and online texts included. The search was restricted to texts directly relating to the sermon by Petr Piřha, not the Istanbul Convention in general. All examined material could be categorized under these groups: mainstream media of public service (*Česká televize, Český rozhlas*), mainstream private-owned media (*Aktuálně.cz, DTV, Hospodářské noviny, idnes.cz, Lidovky.cz, Respekt*), official church media and blogs (Czech Bishop’s Conference website), and Christian private-owned media and blogs (*Christnet.eu*).⁶ With relevance to the given homily, the time period was restricted to publishing between October 2018 and January

A recent media image of the Catholic Church, for instance, was discussed in KOUDELKOVÁ, P., ed. *Obraz církve v českých a slovenských médiích v letech 2015-2018*. Karolinum, Praha, 2021.

⁵ KLEIN, S. *Erkenntnis und Methode in der Praktischen Theologie*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 2005. Fuchs, O. “Relationship between Practical Theology and Empirical Research.” *Journal of Empirical Theology* (2001), no. 2: 5-19.

⁶ For Czech Catholic media, see MORAVEC, P., and L. LACKOVÁ. “Denial and Fear: Psychological Analysis of Covid-19 Information in a Czech Fundamentalistic Catholic Journal.” *Open Theology*, no. 7 (2021): 475–90, p. 478.

2019 with some exceptions marking an important aftermath in early 2020. The public character of this research did not require data anonymization; all authors are listed with their full names.⁷

The chosen texts were examined using the content analysis method; in particular, it explored the content, text producers and their positions in the debate and established the following as research results: a) building a timeline of 30 relevant articles; b) describing key actors and their communication strategies; and c) identifying key themes. During this inductive analytical process, I tried to ensure transparency of the process and meet intersubjectivity standards. The method used allowed for a flexible research process but could not guarantee the full relevancy and representativeness of examined material.⁸

The study revealed, for example, that there was disproportionately more pro-ratification than anti-ratification material. This was especially observed in mainstream media, which seemed to provide more space to the pro-Convention position. How to interpret such a difference? Was this due to supporters' ability to provide statements, or rather to opponents' distaste to defend their position publicly? Or was this related to distrust towards mainstream media in general? Or could this be attributed to the alleged liberal tendencies of Czech mainstream media, which dissuaded anti-gender ideology supporters from avoiding publicity? Research details follow after a regional contextualization.

The Czech Republic has low religious affiliation; the country is believed to be among the most secular European countries, with about 20% religiously affiliated

⁷ Petr Hruška summarized various contributions on parish website; this list initiated my research interest. HRUŠKA, P. "K diskuzi o Istanbulské úmluvě a problematice genderu." 20.12.2018. <https://www.farnostsokolov.cz/aktuality/k-diskuzi-o-istanbulske-umluve-a-problematice-genderu> [8.4.2021]. Introducing himself as a white heterosexual who his happy in his priestly celibacy, Hruška claimed that the sermon was demagogical, Cardinal Dominik Duka's support scandalous, the protest of Aneta Petani sympathetic and appropriate, the Convention good though not perfect, and further scientific study necessary. From his own church, he expected a profound revision of sexual scandals rather than a new crusade against gender ideology. Hruška, P. "Můj istanbulský coming out." *Facebook*, 22.10.2018. https://www.facebook.com/petr.hruska?__tn__=-UC*F [15.4.2021]

⁸ MAYRING, P. *Qualitative Content Analysis. Theoretical Foundation, Basic Procedures and Software Solution*, Beltz, Klagenfurt, 2014.

and 10% churchgoers monthly,⁹ so the role and prestige of churches are low in the society today.¹⁰ In the public popularity polls, for instance, churches take bottom place together with politicians as was the case in 2017.¹¹ The Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia was one of the most persecuted groups during communism; as a result, it developed open, ecumenical and pro-democratic positions. A shift to nationalist conservatism such as the anti-Convention campaign where the Catholic hierarchy took a stand alongside right-activists is therefore striking.¹² Similar tendencies have been observed in other Eastern European countries as well, where a shift from secular communism to religious nationalism has been lately observed.

Timeline

The examined texts were published between October 2018 and January 2019, with a few additional responses added later in 2020, see “Media articles” diagram below.

anti-ratification	Date	pro-ratification
Pířha (sermon), Kázání v katedrále	9/28/2018	
	10/5/2018	Cemper (website), Petr Pířha šířil ve sváteční den v katedrále sv. Víta poplašné zprávy

⁹ In 2018, the Pew Research Center indicated 11% visiting monthly, specifying that 8% of adults are “highly religious” in the country, J. EVANS and C. BARONAVSKI, “How Do European Countries Differ in Religious Commitment?” Pew Research Center, 5.12.2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/05/how-do-european-countries-differ-in-religious-commitment/> [4.10.2019]

¹⁰ HAMPLOVÁ, D. *Náboženství v české společnosti na prahu 3. tisíciletí*, Karolinum, Praha, 2013, p. 46-51.

¹¹ According to polls in 2017, for instance, churches were ranked the least-trusted institutions of public life, with only 25% of respondents expressing confidence in them. CVVM. “Důvěra k vybraným institucím veřejného života.” 10.4.2017. https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a4279/f9/po170410.pdf [22.4.2022]

¹² ČERNOHORSKÁ, V. M. “Who’s Afraid of Istanbul Convention? Resisting „Gender Ideology” Narratives in the Age of Digital Feminism.” In *Feminist Circulations Between East and West*. Edited by Annette Bühler-Dietrich, 91–108. Frank & Timme, Berlin, 2019. p. 97.

anti-ratification	Date	pro-ratification
	10/10/2018	Česká ženská lobby (website), Česká ženská lobby podává trestní oznámení
	10/13/2018	Halík (Lidovky.cz / Christnet.eu), Homosexuálové budou vládnout / Prodavači strachu
	10/17/2018	Petani (Respekt), Museli se ozvat řadoví křesťané
ČBK (website), Proč ČBK nepodporuje ratifikaci tzv. Istanbulské úmluvy?	10/18/2018	
	10/19/2018	Petani (DVTV), Piřha lhal, církve straší lidi, říká aktivistka
Balík (DVTV), Svět ovládnou homosexuálové šokoval v kázání Piřha	10/23/2018	
	10/31/2018	Halík (idnes.cz), Piřhovo kázání byla hororová fikce
	10/22/2018	Hruška (Facebook, website), Můj istanbulský coming out
Duka (website), K cause svatováclavského kázání P. Piřhy	10/11/2018	
Piřha (website), Sdělení k diskusi o Istanbulské smlouvě	undated	
	11/1/2018	Petráček (Hospodářské noviny), Piřhovo kázání o vládě homosexuálů byl agresivní bulvár
	11/2/2018	Malý (Český rozhlas), Z Istanbulské úmluvy kritici vyčítají víc, než v ní je
Duka (Blog Aktualně.cz), Léčba genderu papežem Františkem	11/6/2018	
Prohlášení Arcibiskupství pražského	11/12/2018	
	11/16/2018	Holub (Respekt), Nezávislost genderu na pohlaví

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anti-ratification	Date	pro-ratification
	11/22/2018	Cemper (website), Mons. Petr Piřha vysvětluje své kázání dalšími nepravdami
Piřha (Mf Dnes) Vaše rodiny budou roztrřeny, kritizuje dál kněz	11/26/2018	
	11/27/2018	Soukup (Christnet.eu), Pomýlené tažení proti Istanbulské úmluvě
	11/27/2018	Kolářová (Christnet.eu), Pohlaví si nevybíráme
	11/29/2018	Holík (Proglas), Obchodníci se strachem
	11/30/2018	Holub (website), Gender: Je třeba odlišovat, ale ne oddělovat
Duka (letter), Official Letter to Tomáš Petráček	12/3/2018	
Kročil (website), Křesřanská antropologie a genderová teorie	12/4/2018	
	12/10/2018	řotola (Christnet.eu), Gender je i pro křesřany
	12/11/2018	Halík (website, Aktuálně.cz), Prohlášení k písemnému napomenutí ze strany Dominika Duky
	12/14/2018	Beránek (Universum), Kouřová clona Istanbulské úmluvy
	12/20/2018	Hruška (website), K diskusi o Istanbulské smlouvě
	1/3/2019	Smyčka et al. (website) Otevřený dopis s otázkami na p. kardinála Dominika Duku
Duka (letter), Odpověď arcibiskupství	1/22/2019	
Petráček released from the Chapter	3/1/2020	
	3/25/2020	Mohelník et al. (website), Podpora člena redakční rady Tomáše Petráčka

anti-ratification	Date	pro-ratification
	4/17/2020	Petráček (Reflex), Stárnoucí Zeman a Duka úporně brání svět, který mizí
	5/1/2020	Petráček (Respekt), Církev s nakazila přesvědčením, že na lidi je potřeba dohlížet

Diagram 1: "Media articles"¹³

Key actors

In this case study, three different players were examined, the conservative anti-Convention group, represented mainly by Catholic hierarchy; the progressive pro-Convention group, represented by Catholic priests and church members; and media providing space for both opposing groups. I treated texts from authors outside of the Catholic Church as secondary sources.

Cardinal Dominik Duka, the serving President of the Czech Bishop's Conference (ČBK), represented the opponents. During his political attempt for the restitution of church property, he repeatedly demonstrated closeness to politicians with nationalist and far-right tendencies. The highest church office provided him with a strong public voice and influence, so he became a major representative of the anti-Convention group, overlooking at the same time misuse by calling it hysteria or hesitating to meet victims of sexual abuse by clergymen. Josef Beránek observes that the Petr Piňha sermon was soon supported and cited by various disinformation media.¹⁴ Some other church representatives were also involved in the anti-Convention campaign. The ČBK issued a pastoral letter in May 2018 warning against the ratification; the bishops claimed concerns about its content and that existing Czech law was protecting men and women enough.¹⁵

¹³ Author's name is followed with used media within brackets; "website" stands for the author's homepage, either private or official.

¹⁴ BERÁNEK, J. "Kouřová clona Istanbulske úmluvy." *Universum*, 14.12.2018. <http://www.krestanskaakademie.cz/universum/4-18.pdf> [22.4.2022]

¹⁵ Česká biskupská konference. "Istanbulska úmluva není posilou přátelství muže a ženy, píšou biskupové." *Pastýřský list*. 13.5.2018. [https://www.cirkev.cz/cs/aktuality/180513istanbulska-umluva-neni-posilou-pratelstvi-muze-a-zeny-pisou-](https://www.cirkev.cz/cs/aktuality/180513istanbulska-umluva-neni-posilou-pratelstvi-muze-a-zeny-pisou)

In her feminist study, Vanda Maufras Černohorská describes church activities in this matter as disinformation campaign spreading mainly through religious gatherings, social media, mail chains, and disinformation blogs.¹⁶

The supporters were represented by Catholics who opposed both the format and content of the sermon.¹⁷ Although from various backgrounds, most were Catholic priests and public figures (such as Tomáš Halík, Tomáš Petráček and Petr Hruška), while two were bishops (Václav Malý and Tomáš Holub). In Czech media, Halík usually takes a prominent position due to his appealing way of communicating; he appears often in public media and speaks engagingly on given issues. His voice, therefore, was particularly sought-after by the journalists during the case.

Czech mainstream media are seen as trustworthy and high-quality sources in the post-communist space. The public service media *Czech Television* and *Czech Radio* have for long been rated as independent and objective. There has been a slight tension between mainstream media (independently controlled institutions) and the church (a hierarchical established organization with its own agenda). Generally, there were no serious conflicts in past decades; the public service media provide, for instance, significant broadcasting time to religious news and programs. Recent financial, gender, and sexual issues somewhat increased the distance between church and media. In an attempt to protect its ethical worldview, as well as its organizational structures, the church has often responded with distrust and resistance, as was the case with the Istanbul Convention.¹⁸ In gener-

biskupove [25.1.2021]. The anti-Convention campaign included representatives of other six churches as they appealed to the Parliament against ratification, Česká biskupská konference. “Církve ke schvalování tzv. Istanbulské úmluvy v ČR.” 25.6.2018. <https://www.cirkev.cz/cs/aktuality/180625cirkve-ke-schvalovani-tzv-istanbulske-umluvy-v-cr> [22.4.2022]

¹⁶ ČERNOHORSKÁ, “Who’s Afraid,” p. 98.

¹⁷ Daniel Soukup, for instance, demonstrated false argumentation by the anti-ratification campaign, SOUKUP, D. “Pomýlené tažení proti Istanbulské úmluvě.” *Christnet.eu*, 27.11.2018. http://www.christnet.eu/clanky/6153/pomylene_tazeni_proti_istanbulske_umluve.url [25.1.2021]

¹⁸ The major tension between the Catholic Church and Czech Television came in 2020 when the Czech Bishops’ Conference nominee Hana Lipovská became a member of the Czech

al, the media image of the Catholic Church is rather negative for which journalist and academic Denisa Hejlová holds both the church and the media responsible.¹⁹

Key themes

Although the initial idea of this project was to explore the argumentative positions and ideological backgrounds of pro- and anti-groups with regard to the Istanbul Convention, I realized that the document and its political efforts were not, ironically, a main issue of the debate. In Czech society, the Petr Piřha sermon against the Convention was indeed a trigger; however, it disclosed a major division within and between church groups with different social and political positions, and revealed forms of communication in expressing philosophical world-views and psychological insecurities. Gender violence is not therefore a primary theme of this work; rather it is a set of themes that emerged during the research and outlined more general questions of gender and equality, fear and power, authority and hierarchy, as they were communicated – intentionally or not – during the debate in Czech media. These will be examined and discussed normatively in the following part of this paper.

It should be noted nevertheless that the Istanbul Convention was challenged from various sides across Europe. While in Western Europe it underwent standard public and political debate, the experts in Central and Southeast Europe maintain that the text came under significant attack from far-right and nationalist conservative forces, which claimed it was primarily promoting “gender

Television Council. The controversial Catholic economist challenged the very existence of the renowned public broadcaster and strived for removing the director general during her time in office (2020-2021). Despite facing massive opposition from different Christian circles, Dominik Duka personally supported Lipovská. She was dismissed for running in the parliamentary election in September 2021. *Český rozhlas*. “Poslanci odvolali Lipovskou z Rady České televize.” *irozhlas.cz*, 17.9.2021. https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravodomov/hana-lipovska-snemovna-rada-ct-lubomir-volny-volny-blok_2109171543_ere [19.4.2022]

¹⁹ HEJLOVÁ, D. “Církevní public relations: proč má u nás církve tak špatnou pověst?” In *Obráz církve v českých a slovenských médiích v letech 2015-2018*. Edited by Petra Koudelková, 11–17. Karolinum, Praha, 2021, p. 11-12.

ideology” and attacking traditional family values.²⁰ The “Istanbul Convention in Europe” diagram below shows a clear disproportion: most Western countries have ratified it (dark blue), many Central and Eastern countries have not ratified it (light blue), and Turkey withdrew as of 2021 (red).

3. Analysis and Discussion

Invisible Gender

Besides a few individual voices, two significant responses from church public were registered after the sermon. First, Aneta Petani, a 22-year-old Catholic mother, undressed herself during the liturgical service in the cathedral. She later commented it was her personal protest against the sermon, as well as the follow-up from church hierarchy; she revealed it was a lack of discussion with different opinions within the church and frustration which initiated her unusual protest.²² Second, a group of Christians released an open letter on 3.1.2019 asking the Cardinal to respond to several questions in this matter. It was initially signed by 360 people; later some petitioners joined.²³ In a response letter on 22.1.2019,



Diagram 2: “Istanbul Convention in Europe”²¹

²⁰ BUYUK, H. F., et al. “Domestic Violence Treaty Falling Victim to Political Obtuseness.” *BalkanInsight*, 4.8.2020. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/04/istanbul-treaty-falling-victim-to-political-obtuseness/> [16.4.2022]

²¹ KARAKAS, B. “Turkey to Pull Out of Istanbul Convention on Violence Against Women.” *Deutsche Welle*, 30.6.2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-to-pull-out-of-istanbul-convention-on-violence-against-women/a-58114681> [16.4.2022]

²² PETANI, A., and DRTINOVÁ D. “Píthá lhal, církev straší lidi, říká aktivistka po svém polonahém protestu před Dukou.” *DVTV*. 19.10.2018. <https://video.aktualne.cz/dvtv/dvtv-19-10-2018-zdenek-hrib-aneta-petani/r~00e124f2d3cb11e890ecac1f6b220ee8/r~c9e3e400d39b11e89de10cc47ab5f122/> [8.4.2021]

²³ SMYČKA, D., et al. “Otevřený dopis s otázkami na p. pardinála Dominika Duku v souvislosti s jeho napomínáním oponentů církevní antigenderové kampaně.” 3.1.2019. <https://>

Dominik Duka only referred to a previous official statement without elaborating his positions in detail.²⁴

The gender representation among involved players is striking in this research; except for Petani's appearance in mainstream media, no other significant initiative from a Catholic woman was registered.²⁵ Although many women signed an open letter to the bishop, no women published a text against the Petr Pířha sermon in argumentation, either representing supporters or opponents. Prior to the sermon, some women were concerned about anti-gender rhetoric by the church, such as Veronika Jeřková,²⁶ Pavla Holíková,²⁷ Marie Kolářová,²⁸ and Růřena Matěnová,²⁹ who confronted the position of hierarchy to the Convention or addressed the problem of domestic violence in general. The follow up debate nevertheless was dominated by men and priests, out of 34 examined texts only four were presented by women.³⁰ On the contrary, many women got involved in

www.petice.com/oteveny_dopis_s_otazkami_na_p_kardinala_duku_v_souvislosti_s_jeho_napominanim_oponent_cirkevni_antigenderove_kampan [15.4.2021]

²⁴ DUKA, D. "Odpověď arcibiskupství." 22.1.2019. <https://www.petice.com/a/220373> [15.4.2021]

²⁵ Theologian Magdaléna Šipka only briefly referred to her experience with domestic violence, Šipka, M. "Proč církvím vadí boj proti násilí na ženách?" *Alarm*, 23.10.2018. <https://a2larm.cz/2018/10/proc-cirkvim-vadi-boj-proti-nasili-na-zenach/> [2.4.2021]

²⁶ Jeřková, V. "Istanbulská úmluva pohledem právníčky." *Proglas*. 12.5.2018. <https://zpravy.proglas.cz/komentar-tydne/komentar-tydne-istanbulska-umluva-pohledem-pravnicky/> [22.4.2022]

²⁷ HOLÍKOVÁ, P. "Úvaha nad smyslem pastýřského listu biskupů ke schvalování tzv. Istanbulské úmluvy." *Christnet.eu*, 15.5.2018. https://www.christnet.eu/clanky/6063/uvaha_nad_smyslem_pastyrského_listu_biskupu_ke_schvalovani_tzv_istanbulske_umluvy.url [15.4.2021]

²⁸ KOLÁŘOVÁ, M. "Domácí násilí v křesťanské rodině." *Christnet.eu*, 25.5.2018. https://www.christnet.eu/clanky/6069/domaci_nasili_v_krestanske_rodine.url [22.4.2022]

²⁹ MUTĚNOVÁ, R. "K Istanbulské úmluvě: reakce na článek v informacích farnosti katedrál sv. Ducha v Hradci Králové." *Christnet.eu*, 28.9.2018. https://www.christnet.eu/clanky/6120/k_istanbulske_umluve_reakce_na_clanek_v_informacich_farnosti_katedraly_sv_ducha_v_hradci_kralove.url [22.4.2022]

³⁰ Hruška noticed this in his "coming out" anecdotal: though introducing himself as a white heterosexual man who his happy in his priestly celibacy he claimed that the sermon was demagogical, Duka's support scandalous, Petani's protest sympathetic and appropriate, the Convention good though not perfect, and further scientific study necessary. From

secular part of the society, such as women lobby organizations, women lawyers and journalists contributed to discussion after the sermon.³¹

For church this is an alarming call. It raises serious questions about character of gender equality in church, as well as church structures, management and distribution of power. Why did not Catholic women participate in a debate concerning them personally? Was it a rigid hierarchical structure that prevented them in raising their voice? How about their position as lay and non-clerical members? To what extent did women feel being full members of church organization without holding any offices? If women were not involved in the Istanbul Convention discussion – which was not theological but social and cultural matter – how can they contribute to more general gender discourse?

Technically, it brings an image of church where exclusively men – clerical authorities such as priests and bishops – represent the church organization in both opposing groups. Women, on the other hand, speak from their secular expertise position as lawyers, journalist, and activists. How much is this image of church as men's club false? Women are represented in social and charity work, however, when it comes to leadership roles in management, theology, or a particular policy – such as the Istanbul Convention – women representatives somewhat disappear from public discourse.

A striking difference between women's representation in Western and Eastern European churches, for instance, has been observed. While women in Western Europe hold important positions on various levels of church life (dioceses, parishes, chaplaincies, universities), in post-communist countries they make their careers primarily in education (catechesis) and social work (charity organizations). Is this due to their gender or rather to their lay status? Are not lay men actually in a similar position without access to professional church engagement? Two possible explanations emerge, one economic and the other cultural.

Churches in post-communist Europe are indeed financially less capable to employ lay men and women than their counterparts in the countries that receive somewhat stable income due to church taxes and social responsibility standards. Since the political change in 1989, each recognized religion has gone through a

his own church he expected a profound revision of sexual scandals rather than a new crusade against gender identity. Hruška, Petr. "Můj istanbulský coming out." *Facebook*, 22.10.2018. https://www.facebook.com/petr.hruska?__tn__=-UC*F [15.4.2021]

³¹ The Czech Women's Lobby filled a lawsuit against Petr Piřha for providing misleading information to churchgoers, Černořorská, "Who's Afraid," p. 98.

transformation process that included also a financial aspect. In the Czech Republic, for instance, churches were provided for from the state budget until 2013 when a new law was passed: financial and property compensation for the confiscation of property under the communist regime was settled.³² Among others, this new situation led to significant economic changes within the church, one of them being a reduction in the number of lay employees, both men and women. If they are unable to engage professionally in church, they simply withdraw from the official church space. Their position as a “powerless majority” prevents women from being active even in specifically women’s issues, such as gender and family violence.

A second concern is the different cultural conditions in Western and Eastern Europe. Since cultural revolutions in the 1960s, societies in the West have been challenged by social progress in many areas – political, cultural and sexual. This long-lasting exposition to pluralism and liberalism affected also churches in both regions. While Western Europeans show some degree of open and inclusive communication,³³ Eastern Europeans are far more conservative today.³⁴ Post-communist societies still have not fully discussed, accepted and implemented many new phenomena into their juridical systems and cultural practice.³⁵ Different responses to recent global problems, such as the financial, migration and Covid-19 crises, newly revealed this differentiation.

This is true also for churches and their ability to respond to new situations, such as the gender identity debate. While equality between men and women has for long been theologically treated, the pastoral practice is more problematic. The lack of women in leading positions such as parish managers or spiritual ministers constitutes an identity problem as well. If women are missing as role models,

³² “Dokonáno jest. Klaus nechal projít církevní restituce.” *Česká televize*, 22.11.2012. <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/1133098-dokonano-jest-klaus-nechal-projit-cirkevni-restituce> [20.4.2022]

³³ A Synodal Path started in Germany in 2019 could serve as a representative example.

³⁴ ANIC, J. R. “Doch es ist auch wahr, dass das Männliche und das Weibliche nicht etwas starr Umgrenztes ist.” In *Pastoraltheologie in Mitteleuropa*. Edited by Klara A. CSISZAR, Johann POCK, and János VIK, 35-50. Grünewald, Ostfildern, 2021.

³⁵ HALMAN, L. and E. van INGEN. “Secularization and Changing Moral Views: European Trends in Church Attendance and Views on Homosexuality, Divorce, Abortion, and Euthanasia.” *European Sociological Review* 31, no. 5 (2015): 616–27.

protectors and counsellors, no other women are inspired to confront the male-dominated hierarchy on issues such as gender.

While gender was somewhat invisible in church, sexuality has on the contrary been an important theme. Sexual ethics, for instance, constituted a major theme for John Paul II in his anthropological theology, which was not – according to Anic and Šiljak – questioned later by Pope Benedict XIV or Pope Francis.³⁶ Recent cases of sexual abuse within the church have revealed how resistant the church is in its structural defense. Sexual morals have to some degree become a main focus of media that cover the church today, be it sexual abuses (worldwide), the violation of sexual minorities' rights, contraception restrictions (Africa), or the fight against abortion (the United States). To what extent is this only a media image and to what extent does it mirror reality? Legalistic sexual ethics seems critical in contemporary pastoral practice as it is seen, for instance, in discussion about the Holy Communion for divorced Catholics. For outsiders, the church without comprehensible communication and respectful dialog may not only become old-fashioned and unattractive in the Western societies but also contribute to the violation of human rights and serious health problems in other regions of the world.

Pope Francis demonstrates interest in gender themes as Casanova observes “a change in tone and the relegation of issues of gender and sexual morality from the core to the periphery of church teaching.”³⁷ Although following his predecessors theologically in outlining gender complementarity,³⁸ he has recently introduced some practical and structural changes in this matter. In practical ministry, Francis invited women to acolytate, appointed the first women for altar ministry in 2022³⁹ and opened a debate on the diaconate of women – until now the first

³⁶ ANIC, J. R., and ŠILJAK, Z. S. “Secularization of Religion as the Source of Religious Gender Stereotypes.” *Feminist Theology*, May (2020): 1–18. p. 11.

³⁷ CASANOVA, J. “A Catholic Church in Global Secular World.” In *Renewing the Church in a Secular Age: Holistic Dialogue and Kenotic Vision*. Edited by Charles Taylor, 67–84. Washington DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2016, p. 82.

³⁸ ANIC and ŠILJAK. “Secularization,” p. 11.

³⁹ “Pope Francis: Ministries of lector and acolyte to be open to women.” *Vatican News*, 11.1.2021. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-01/pope-francis-opens-ministries-lector-acolyte-women.html> [20.4.2022]

step to priestly ordination – by establishing a study commission on the topic.⁴⁰ Structurally, the number of women employed in Vatican offices has increased and in 2021 reached a milestone with the appointment of a woman to a senior synod post, which made Nathalie Becquart the first woman with voting rights.⁴¹ The Synodal Path in Germany and the Synod on Synodality follow a similar direction by identifying the role of women in church as their top priority.⁴²

Visible Enemy

The Petr Pitha sermon against the Istanbul Convention, above all, provoked fears of alleged ideology; it used exaggerated images to address listeners emotionally. The speech, without ever mentioning violence against women, warned against “gender ideology”⁴³ which he charged contributes to destabilizing families, undermining traditional heterosexual marriages, and the upbringing of children.⁴⁴ The preacher later issued an elaborated document in which he rejected violence against women and children but at the same time presented peculiar legal cases worldwide which he thought were problematic.⁴⁵ This text was chal-

⁴⁰ ZAGANO, P. “New Women Deacons Commission to Meet with Unclear Agenda.” *National Catholic Reporter*, 31.8.2021. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/just-catholic/new-women-deacons-commission-meet-unclear-agenda> [20.4.2022]. More on this topic in MACY, G., D. T.WILLIAM, and P. ZAGANO. *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future*, Paulist Press, New York, 2011.

⁴¹ “Number of Women Employees in the Vatican on the Rise.” *Vatican News*, 6.3.2020. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2020-03/number-of-women-employees-in-the-vatican-on-the-rise.html> [21.4.2022]; “Pope Appoints Woman Under-Secretary at Synod of Bishops.” *Vatican News*, 6.2.2021. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-02/pope-appointment-under-secretaries-synod-bishops-woman.html> [21.4.2022]

⁴² Der Synodaler Weg, <https://www.synodalerweg.de/> [16.4.2022]; the Synod on Synodality, <https://www.synod.va/en.html> [16.4.2022]

⁴³ This term is used to encompass all forms of activism, policy proposals, and debates connected to sex, gender and women’s rights that are problematic for the Catholic Church, see ANIC, J. R., and Z. S. ŠILJAK. “Secularization of Religion as the Source of Religious Gender Stereotypes.” *Feminist Theology*, May (2020): 1–18. p. 16.

⁴⁴ ČERNOHORSKÁ, “Who’s Afraid,” p. 98.

⁴⁵ PÍŤHA, P. “Sdělení k diskusi o Istanbulské úmluvě.” (undated) <http://kapitulavsv.cz/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Mons.-Petr-Pi%C5%A5ha-Sd%C4%9Blen%C3%AD-k-dis>

lenged as treating data inaccurately, using alarming fake news, and building on satirical material.⁴⁶ By doing so, Piřha ironically disapproved of a possible hyperbolic character of the sermon – the supreme argument of his supporters.⁴⁷

Martina Prejdoová observes that while the supporters addressed primarily the issue directly related to the document, which is domestic violence and violence against women, opponents of ratification addressed mostly gender and social traditions, and by doing so, shifted the discussion in a different direction using language as “perverted law and dictatorship.”⁴⁸ Representatives of both sides responded: Kolářová, a progressive church officer herself, referred to Pope Francis and his solidarity with transsexual people claiming that people cannot choose their sexual orientation; she did not mention the Convention in her text though.⁴⁹ Interestingly, an exchange followed between two Bishops: while Tomáš Holub briefly outlined gender as problematic,⁵⁰ Vlastmil Kročil replied with elaborate arguments to reject “gender ideology”,⁵¹ which was then challenged by the sociologist Jaroslav Šotola.⁵² The opponents of the Convention later admitted usage of expressive language in that particular homily but also claimed that allegoric

kusi-o-Istanbulsk%C3%A9-%C3%BAmluv%C4%9B.pdf [8.4.2021]; also published later in PIŘHA, P. “Vaše rodiny budou roztrženy, kritizuje dál kněz Piřha Istanbulskou úmluvu.” *idnes.cz*, 26.11.2018. https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/komentar-petr-pitha.A181126_150236_domaci_zaz#space-a [22.4.2022]

⁴⁶ CEMPER, J. “Mons. Petr Piřha vysvětluje své kázání dalšími nepravdami.” 22.11.2018. <https://manipulatori.cz/mons-petr-pitha-vysvetluje-sve-kazani-dalsimi-nepravdami/> [19.4.2021]

⁴⁷ MOLÁČEK, J. “Kněz Piřha rozmetal argumentaci... svých obhájců.” *Deník N*, 26.11.2018. <https://denikn.cz/26559/knez-pitha-rozmetal-argumentaci-svych-obhajcu/> [22.4.2022]

⁴⁸ PREJDOVÁ, M. “Kontroverzní Istanbulská úmluva: Co na ni říkají politické strany a zájmové skupiny v ČR?” <https://www.centrumlidskaprava.cz/kontroverzni-istanbulska-umluva-co-na-ni-rikaji-politicke-strany-zajmove-skupiny-v-cr> [7.4.2021]

⁴⁹ KOLÁŘOVÁ, M. “Pohlaví si nevybíráme.” *Christnet.eu*, 27.11.2018 https://www.christnet.eu/clanky/6152/pohlavi_si_nevybirame.url [22.4.2022]

⁵⁰ HOLUB, Tomáš. “Gender: Je třeba odlišovat, ale ne oddělovat.” 30.11.2018. <https://www.bip.cz/cs/novinky/2018-11-gender-je-treba-odlisovat-ale-ne-oddelovat> [7.4.2021]

⁵¹ KROČIL, V. “Křesťanská antropologie a genderová teorie.” 4.12.2018. <https://www.bcb.cz/krestanska-antropologie-a-genderova-teorie/> [22.4.2022]

⁵² ŠOTOLA, J. “Gender je i pro křesťany.” *Christnet.eu*, 10.12.2018. https://www.christnet.eu/clanky/6159/gender_je_i_pro_krestany.url [22.4.2022]

and apocalyptic language is a legitimate preaching hyperbole.⁵³ Was a shift in navigating the debate also intentional rhetorical strategy, or was it rather a play with politically attractive anti-Western cards?

The need for enemies often serves as a cheap political and religious tool; a well-defined danger shall enforce ideologies easily. No matter if a potential threat is legitimate or not, raising fear in the population is an effective instrument for strengthening power and eliminating diversity. Černožorská claims, for instance, that the church demonstrated anti-Brussels rhetoric and anti-EU sentiments in this particular case.⁵⁴ If some Christians maintain that secularization is a major danger for churches today, then decreasing religiosity leads to confusion especially in established churches and, as such, has a manipulation potential. Tomáš Halík observes that the church, which had survived a “hard secularization” during communism, faces a “soft secularization” in democracy. This shock pushes many people to look for a new enemy and the “corrupt West” serves this role perfectly: “In frequent sermons in post-communist countries, lamenting jeremiads on the ‘tsunami of secularism, liberalism and consumerism’ have proliferated, unacknowledged copying the anti-Western rhetoric of communist ideologues. These ecclesiastical circles were seized by vertigo and fear of freedom, agoraphobia – a fear of open space, literally: fear of the market.”⁵⁵

Similarly, José Casanova observes that “denouncing modern development as a reversion to paganism or rampant relativism is to misunderstand modern historical developments.” The traditionalist and defensive anti-gender position of the Church, moreover, leads to new social phenomena, such as female secularization and erosion church authority on sexual teaching. His solution lays in a renewed Church without clericalism and focus on the poorest and weakest, especially women; and his hopes are in greater participation of women in administrative and ministerial authority.⁵⁶

Who or what plays the enemy in a given time is of minor importance. In this case, a gender progressive worldview was portrayed as dangerous, threatening the social and cultural position of the majority population. The official

⁵³ DUKA, D. “Official Letter to Tomáš Petráček (Č. J.: S/2018/505).” 03.12.2018; DUKA, D. “Léčba genderu papežem Františkem.” *Blog Aktuálně.cz*. 6.11.2018. <https://blog.aktualne.cz/blogy/dominik-duka.php?itemid=32760> [15.4.2021]

⁵⁴ ČERNOŽORSKÁ, “Who’s Afraid,” p. 96.

⁵⁵ HALÍK, T. *Odpoledne křesťanství: Odvaha k proměně*, NLN, Praha, 2021, p. 114-115.

⁵⁶ CASANOVA, “A Catholic Church,” p. 80.

church, which sees its role as an authority on moral issues, campaigned against the Istanbul Convention and sought for experts with similar views to approve its theological argumentation. The state office suggested that their competence and expertise was not tested carefully enough; it listed several texts from church-related organizations and politicians as disinformation and unreliable sources.⁵⁷

Churches need expert opinion in relevant fields, but their credentials must be guaranteed both professionally and morally. Operating with unreliable data may not only mislead opponents but misbalance the public debate. The way churches enter into and operate in the public space is therefore critical. If the main concern of churches is ethical influence within a particular public debate, sooner or later they are confronted with the fragile lines between democratic rule (state), religious teaching (church) and individual responsibility (personal coherence). Recognizing these lines delineates important ethical questions regarding civil juridical standards, religious consciousness and personal context.

The established religious organizations tend towards conservatism; their inclination to tradition and structures justifies their very existence. It is striking nevertheless if such rhetoric is used in secular and liberal society to appeal to the general public. What kind of audience, for instance, was the Czech church trying to address with its conservative and political-right language? In Croatia, Jadranka Rebeka Anic observes that anti-genderism is a part of the church mainstream; she sees church documents as the main reason for supporting anti-gender discourse in the Croatian church.⁵⁸ It is similar in Poland, where Elzbieta Adamiak notes that the Catholic Church takes a mostly conservative position

⁵⁷ The state office identified, for instance, texts of Tomáš Zdechovský, Member of European Parliament for Christian People's Party, the Moravsko-slezská křesťanská akademie, and the Byzantine Catholic Patriarchate, alongside disinformation websites, such as Protiproud, Vlastenecké noviny and nationalist Konzervativní listy and Pravý prostor, see Úřad vlády ČR. "Úmluva Rady Evropy o prevenci a potírání násilí vůči ženám a domácího násilí: mýty a fakta. září 2018. https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/rovne-prilezitosti-zen-a-muzu/Projekt_OPZ/Vystupy_projektu/brozura_IU.pdf, p. 15 [7.4.2021]

⁵⁸ ANIC, J. R. "Anti-Genderismus in Kroatien – Kontextbezogene Besonderheiten." In *Anti-Genderismus in Europa. Allianzen von Rechtspopulismus und religiösem Fundamentalismus. Mobilisierung - Vernetzung – Transformation*. Edited by Sonja A. Strube et al., 161–172. Bielefeld, 2021.

on these issues.⁵⁹ Unlike in Croatia and Poland, however, the Czech church does not dispose of a strong cultural capital. Vanda Maufras Černohorská argues that despite usually having a peripheral voice in the Czech Republic, by adopting the anti-Western rhetoric the church actually attracts the interest of diverse political supporters.⁶⁰ Some maintain that anti-gender initiatives provide the Catholic Church with a desired public and political influence.⁶¹ András Máté-Tóth speaks about European post-communist countries as a region with a “wounded collective identity” and argues that people and societies look back with nostalgia without ever overcoming the feeling of being victims.⁶²

Could this be true also for churches? Could not their nostalgia be a symptom of a fearful attitude which eventually prevents churches from adapting to a pluralistic and diverse society? The Czech Primate contextualized the problem by demonstrating that the Presidents of the Bishops’ Conferences in the Visegrad Group as well as most Bishops’ Conferences in Eastern Europe rejected the Istanbul Convention.⁶³ Why did the bishop use such a political and geographical distinction here? Petráček emphasizes that seeing Christianity as identity ideology is strong in conservative circles and functions towards mobilizing political and social forces which can work only temporarily. At the same time, the church loses credibility and authenticity in its fight while the state, on the contrary, “strengthens as an institution and gains credit weakened by the neoliberal critique of recent decades.”⁶⁴

Use of media can provide some key to these questions. What kind of media did the groups use as their communication means? The research showed that the supporters, who can be characterized as progressive, used mainly mainstream media and liberal Christian websites, such as *Christnet.eu*. The opponents, char-

⁵⁹ ADAMIAK, E. “Erfundene Invasion.” In *Anti-Genderismus in Europa. Allianzen Von Rechtspopulismus Und Religiösem Fundamentalismus. Mobilisierung - Vernetzung - Transformation*. Edited by Sonja A. STRUBE et al., 133–46. Bielefeld: 2021.

⁶⁰ ČERNOHORSKÁ, “Who’s Afraid,” p. 96.

⁶¹ ANIC, J. R. “Anti-Gender Bewegung: Ein Beitrag Zur Bewertung Des Phänomens.” *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research*, no. 24 (2016): 13–29, p. 21.

⁶² MÁTÉ-TÓTH, A. 2020. “Wounded Words in a Wounded World: Opportunities for Mission in Central and Eastern Europe Today.” *Mission Studies*, no. 37 (3): 354–373.

⁶³ DUKA, D. “Official Letter to Tomáš Petráček (Č. J.: S/2018/505).” 03.12.2018.

⁶⁴ PETRÁČEK, T. “Církev v karanténě: konec iluzí.” *Christnet.eu*, 26.7.2020. http://www.christnet.eu/clanky/6432/cirkev_v_karantene_konec_iluzi.url [22.4.2022]

acterized as conservative, used mostly official church websites for communicating their message. While referring to other similar church controversies, Petráček for instance observes that choice of identitarian media as the privileged communication channels of some Czech hierarchs instead of mainstream secular and church media shows the inclination of many conservative Catholics towards the extremist political and ideological groups.⁶⁵

The choice of media sends an important message; by preferring controversial or disinformation media over respected journalism, an organization indicates its distrust to state and society in which it operates. While controlling one's own media content is a reasonable and acceptable communication strategy, avoiding critical confrontation from mainstream media may signalize insecurity and an inability to face argumentative opposition. The problematic relation is mutual though. Hejlová maintains that the Czech media image is mostly negative when referring to church issues; the reasons can be found in both incompetent church communication and church prejudices in general society.⁶⁶

Authority and Power

A third important issue was the exercise of power within the church: two priests who publicly confronted the hierarchy about the Petr Piřha sermon claimed being punished with church disciplinary actions afterwards. Tomáš Halík and Tomáš Petráček challenged both the content and format of this particular homily as “misleading, not argumentative enough, emotional, spreading irrational panic, etc.” Both of them respected professors as well as Catholic priests, asked for re-statement of the extreme parts of the speech and called for critical argumentation.

Both men were eventually affected with personal disciplinary actions: Halík was received an admonition from the Archbishop in November 2018 for media appearances where he “challenges the opinions issued by his bishop on various

⁶⁵ PETRÁČEK, T. “Církev v karanténě: konec iluzí.” *Christnet.eu*, 26.7.2020. http://www.christnet.eu/clanky/6432/cirkev_v_karantene_konec_iluzi.url [22.4.2022]

⁶⁶ HEJLOVÁ, D. “Církevní public relations: proč má u nás církev tak špatnou pověst?” In *Obráz církve v českých a slovenských médiích v letech 2015-2018*. Edited by Petra Koudelková, 11–17. Karolinum, Praha, 2021, p. 11.

aspects of public life.”⁶⁷ Petráček got an admonition in December 2018 for his critical article and for not being respectful of church teaching and hierarchy.⁶⁸ Later, Petráček was also released from a prestigious priestly organization in March 2020.⁶⁹ Both priests maintained that their punishment was handed down with the direct involvement of Cardinal Duka.⁷⁰ The archbishop denied these accusations as irrelevant, claiming it was not for their disagreement on the Istanbul Convention but for their problematic media behavior. Indeed, both Halík (Archdiocese of Prague) and Petráček (Diocese of Hradec Králové, now residing in the Archdiocese of Prague) had already had conflicts with Duka prior to this case, challenging him on various political and social issues, so the tension over the Convention was not their first quarrel with him.

Perceiving such actions through media resemble authoritarian church management; relevant discussion and communication seems to be missing. Exercising clerical power in this way seems disturbing within the church especially when it was accompanied with inconsistency in dating the documents, citing the Canon Law, and phrasing on the side of the Archbishop, as both Halík and Petráček claimed. Challenging the sermon was neither a theological issue nor a violation of church discipline. Rather the priests were criticized for addressing their concerns through public media, their natural space for raising awareness. A common pastoral argument would be to challenge – if ever – the church hierarchy in privacy. But is there a safe space in church to bring one’s own concerns transparently and to be listened to? This case suggests that sometimes there are no other means for believers – both lay persons and priests – than bringing the issues into the public.

⁶⁷ “Duka dal Halíkovi písemnou důtku, ten reagoval prohlášením.” *Christnet.eu*, 20.12.2018. https://www.christnet.eu/zpravy/29427/duka_dal_halikovi_pisemnou_dutku_ten_reagoval_prohlasenim.url [15.4.2021]

⁶⁸ DUKA, D. “Official Letter to Tomáš Petráček (Č. J.: S/2018/505).” 03.12.2018.

⁶⁹ “Kardinál Duka odvolal Tomáše Petráčka z kapituly Všech svatých, kritizoval Piňhovo kázání.” *Christnet.eu*, 20.3.2020. https://www.christnet.eu/zpravy/30052/kardinal_duka_odvolal_tomase_petracka_z_kapituly_vsech_svatych_kritizoval_pithovo_kazani.url [21.4.2022]

⁷⁰ “Moje odvolání nepochybně souvisí s kritikou Piňhova kázání, potvrdil Petráček.” *Christnet.eu*, 17.4.2020. https://www.christnet.eu/zpravy/30122/moje_odvolani_souvisi_s_kritikou_pithova_kazani_potvrdil_petracek.url [21.4.2022]

Some argue that a power solution is exercised to keep faith unity and church coherence, as it is often true for state structures and corporations. How is power used in churches today? How is it related to authority and church hierarchy? The recent sexual abuse cases showed that misuse of power brings fear, resistance, manipulation, and control in both secular and religious environments. Churches are not immune to misuse of power and neither are state structures, non-profits or corporations. That women in church did not raise their voices for the Convention, for instance, was most probably due to insecurity and the fear of confronting church hierarchy.

Large organizations handle with disproportional power their individual members, both in democratic and religious intuitions. In secular environments, various control mechanisms were developed to protect individual members and their rights. So, while the church hierarchical system with its post-Vatican II concepts of ecclesiology and human dignity recognizes individuals and their position within the system, it should also review similar cases with serious concerns when addressing problems such as clericalism and hierarchicalism.⁷¹

Befriending Civil Society

This research attempts to characterize the media image of the Catholic Church after a provocative homily against the Istanbul Convention ratification. It has revealed that while the initial impression was strong and somewhat shocking, it was later moderated by church members with different opinions who were vocal in the mainstream media. By doing so, they manifested some degree of ideological pluralism within the church.

By its misleading rhetoric and one-way communication with little argumentation as well as by employing controversial media means, the church nevertheless showed characteristics of an established organization somewhat paralyzed in contemporary social debate when it comes to current gender issues. In an endeavor to promote its anthropological and theological viewpoints, it shifted the direction to a gender agenda instead of addressing a particular social problem of the Istanbul Convention, violence against women and children. This attitude therefore reinforced the image of the church as incompetent partner for serious social discussion.

⁷¹ KEENAN, J. F. "Hierarchicalism." *Theological Studies* 83, no. 1 (2022): 84–108.

At this point I can identify three different themes coming from this research, namely church teaching, church structures, and the church in the media. Though this research explored primarily the media image of church teaching and its communication performance, it also suggested that there are problematic internal themes, such as the use of authority, power, fear, and manipulation. And although the media image cannot capture the full reality, it should outline a possible direction for further theological and ecclesiological reflection. What does, for instance, this image tell the church about its teaching, structures and ways of communication? How important are these results for the church? How would churches like to be presented in society? And – above all – what is the coherence level between media image and church reality?

First, having examined this particular case-study, it seems that a local church needs to review the communication of its agenda, i.e., church teaching. It shall not be possible to address issues of gender and sexuality, for example, with simplified theological argumentation. Church should consult experts in social science and recognize their competence in a respective field. When promoting its worldview, the church should therefore avoid discrediting communication partners, labeling social minority groups, as well as isolation from public debate if it wants to strengthen trust in society. Although expertise is today somewhat disregarded in general society, the church striving for truth shall explore new ways how to enhance communication between faith and reason.⁷² Could not, for instance, a concept of human rights – the very attribute of Christian society – be newly redefined also for the church itself?

Second, redefinition of church structures is not new in church debate as the recent synod on synodality confirms. It was outlined earlier that the existing church system – similarly to all other systems – contributes to the misuse of power and fear, and therefore, some new controlling mechanisms will be necessary to apply. If churches wish to cope with proceeding secularization and individualization, they need to respond with a modernization process in management, leadership and office keeping. Churches should carefully examine, for example, the borderline between defending an organization and defending an individual.

⁷² In studying contemporary gender initiatives, Roman Kuhran outlines that the church is secularizing its discourse in order to clericalize society by adopting civil rather than biblical language, Kuhran, R., “Playing with Science: Sexual Citizenship and the Roman Catholic Church Counter-Narratives in Slovenia and Croatia.” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 49, March-April (2015): 84–92.

In this context, I hold the phenomenon of fear as truly pastoral challenge for the church of the future. If the church re-focuses on existential questions of people today⁷³ and maintains the central Christian message of love, then personal crises and fears shall constitute a relevant subject to address, not an instrument to exploit.

Third, a relationship between church and society – represented by the media in this case – is an ongoing process too. With the growth of new phenomena such as social and disinformation media, however, churches need to constitute their position newly; they need to train people in media literacy and communication to keep pace with general society. The mission of the church cannot be fulfilled without modern communication means, so a reasonable cooperation with respected public media is desirable. From the church this will require gaining some education, expertise and, above all, the trust of other democratic institutions, ensuring professional quality.⁷⁴ As Pope Francis maintains, journalism today is a mission, not a mere profession. In this disinformation age, observes Tereza Zavadilová, the pontiff does not propose a new communication strategy but rather calls for using language responsibly – “to inform people means also to form them.”⁷⁵

4. Conclusion

As ratification of the Istanbul Convention commenced in Czech society, the Catholic representatives attacked the document claiming it was promoting “gender ideology”. The explosive statement, in the form of a liturgical homily, initiated a novel exchange among conservative and progressive groups within the church. By examining a follow-up debate in mainstream and Christian media, this study explored the media image of the church and described a particular division between conservative and progressive worldviews on gender issues in the Catholic Church. While most hierarchy took a conservative and reluctant

⁷³ CSISZAR, Klara A. “Missionarisch. Existenziell. Spirituell.” *Diakonia* 53, no. 1 (February 2022): 11-18.

⁷⁴ KOUDELKOVÁ, P., ed. *Obráz církvě v českých a slovenských médiích v letech 2015-2018*, Karolinum, Praha, 2021.

⁷⁵ ZAVADILOVÁ, Tereza. “Pravda evangelia a jed fake news.” In *Obráz církvě v českých a slovenských médiích v letech 2015-2018*. Edited by Petra Koudelková, 26–36. Karolinum, Praha, 2021, p. 34.

position, it was representatives of the clergy and lay persons who promoted a progressive way and favored ratification. More importantly, it showed that conservatives diverted the discussion in another direction; instead of addressing violence against women and children, they challenged alleged gender ideology as such. Normative analysis of gender and equality, fear and power, authority and hierarchy, as well as communication styles therefore revealed problematic issues in the way the church communicates its teaching and functional structures. With accordance to the ongoing synod on synodality, it suggested a communication enhancement in three specific areas: church teaching, church structures, and media literacy. The way the church communicates its mission, however, is undoubtedly connected with its inner coherence and credibility; theological redefinition and system changes must therefore precede any media strategy.

Future theological research on how the church communicates its values should focus on gaining more understanding of its communication mechanisms as well ethical coherence. By a fearless positioning of the church in a secular society, it would be insightful to examine its relation to modern science and democratic institutions with consideration to both human dignity and transcendental imperatives. Furthermore, both quantitative and qualitative studies are required to better understand the religious character of conservative and progressive positions on topics of gender and sexuality. A comparative study among different European regions, for instance, could explain cultural and political conditions for vigilant and suspicious attitudes toward gender in post-communist churches.

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