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## Popular Piety: Living or “Dead” Tradition?

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**Summary:** Slovenians fill the churches on Holy Saturday, when they bring Easter food to be blessed. Most faithful Slovenes cannot imagine an Easter feast without a blessed ham, but they do not have a problem with the fact that they do not attend the ceremonial Easter Mass. This is why all the parish churches and many chapels in Slovenia are fully occupied on Holy Saturday. The question arises: Is this a living or dead tradition of popular piety? At first glance, it could be said that it is very much alive, but if we search more deeply, we could say that it is dead, because it has become only a matter of custom for many, a habit which no longer has any real connection to the reality of the Easter holiday itself.

In this discussion, the author tries to answer the question of when popular piety is a living tradition and when it is not. First, he briefly presents the relevant terminology. In the second section, he describes when popular piety is a living tradition, and in the third, when it is dead. In the final section, he points to the need for wise pastoral discernment and action so that popular piety will remain a living tradition that helps lead to the fullness of life in the spirit of the gospel.

**Keywords:** Popular Piety, Tradition, Pastoral, Discernment, Liturgy, Spirituality

## Pobożność ludowa: Żywa czy „martwa” tradycja?

**Streszczenie:** Słoweńcy wypełniają kościoły w Wielką Sobotę. W tym dniu przynoszą świąteczne jedzenie, aby je pobłogosławić. Najwierniejsi Słoweńcy nie wyobrażają sobie wielkanocnego święta bez błogosławionej szynki, ale nie mają problemu z tym, że nie idą na świąteczną Mszę wielkanocną. Dlatego w Słowenii wszystkie parafialne kościoły i liczne kaplice są pełne w Wielką Sobotę. Powstaje pytanie: czy jest to żywa czy martwa tradycja pobożności ludowej? Kierując się pierwszym wrażeniem można powiedzieć, że jest to przejaw żywotności. Jeśli zgłębimy problem, możemy stwierdzić, że jest to coś martwego, ponieważ dla wielu stało się to tylko kwestią nawyku, który nie ma już prawdziwego związku z rzeczywistością samego święta wielkanocnego. W niniejszym artykule autor stara się odpowiedzieć na pytanie o to, kiedy popularna pobożność jest żywą tradycją, a kiedy nie? Najpierw krótko przedstawia terminologię, następnie opisuje, kiedy ludowa pobożność jest żywą tradycją, by na końcu zwrócić uwagę na potrzebę mądrego duszpasterskiego rozeznawania i działania, aby ludowa pobożność pozostała żywą tradycją, która pomaga osiągnąć pełnię życia w duchu Ewangelii.

**Słowa kluczowe:** pobożność ludowa, tradycja, duszpasterstwo, rozeznanie, litur-

gia, duchowość.

## Introduction

Every year, the parish churches and many of chapels in Slovenia are most heavily visited on Easter Saturday on the occasion of blessing the Easter meals. Most Slovenes cannot imagine the Easter holiday without a blessed ham, but they do not have any problem with not attending the Easter mass. It is justified to ask: Is this a living or dead tradition of popular piety? At first sight, it could be said that this tradition is very „alive”, but if we search deeper, we could say that it is dead. Why? If the ham and other Easter meals (painted eggs, horseradish and bread, sometimes even with a Bundt cake and some other foods) helped them remember the suffering, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ even more intensely in the circle of their family, and if they would be even more delighted with his victory over death and fury, then the churches would be twice as full on Easter. Perhaps people would be aware that they cannot fully observe the Easter holiday if they do not gather together with all other believers to celebrate the solemn Eucharistic sacrifice. They would also be more encouraged to eat this food so that the meaning of the holiday would be discussed and they would be encouraged to live together each day in the spirit of Christ's caring love, a love which did not stop even at the worst refusal? Otherwise, this is just a beautiful tradition, a fine old custom, a part of the folklore that people remember from their youth and want to preserve without being aware of or wanting to enter into its meaning and message for their lives.

What can be done with this popular piety and others customs (for example, the advent wreaths, Christmas cribs and spruce at Christmas, bundles on a Palm Sunday, the lighting of Easter fire, various blessings, processions, pilgrimages, „parish blessings,” etc.) to transform them into a live rather than a dead tradition?<sup>1</sup> Maybe these people are only given false confirmation that maintaining a popular piety is sufficient and that the person observing this piety is already a true Christian in the Spirit of Christ. By preserving such popular piety, we may be raising Christians of the „Advent wreath”, „crib”, „bundle”, „Easter meals”, „blessings”, „parish blessing” etc.?

According to the teachings of the earlier popes, the blessed Paul VI, St. John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*<sup>2</sup> emphasizes that popular piety is a very valuable expression of faith and „a true expression of the spontaneous missionary activity of the people of God. This is an

<sup>1</sup> For very »alive« characteristics of Christian pilgrimages in Slovenia in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries see M. Kemperl, *The Significance of Pilgrimage and its Dynamics Through Centuries in Slovenia*, „Edinost in dialog” 71 (2016), p. 141–152.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium*, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html) [20.04.2018], nn. 90; 122-127.

ongoing and developing process, of which the Holy Spirit is the principal agent”<sup>3</sup> (122). To him, popular piety is also „a precious treasure of the Catholic Church”<sup>4</sup>, as defined by emeritus Pope Benedict XVI. at the third general meeting of bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean. Pope Francis encourages the attitude of the Good Shepherd, „who seeks not to judge but to love”<sup>5</sup> and emphasizes that we must not underestimate popular piety, since it is the fruit of the enculturated gospel and an active evangelization power as well<sup>6</sup>.

In this paper, we try to answer the question as to when to say when a certain manifestation of popular piety is a living tradition and when it is not. In the first chapter, we will briefly present the terminology. We will explain when popular piety is a living tradition in the second chapter and when it becomes a dead tradition in the third chapter. In the final chapter, we will show the necessity of wise pastoral discernment and action. This way, popular piety will remain a living tradition that helps lead to the fullness of life in the Spirit of Jesus Christ and to active participation in the life and work of the Church as God’s people. This, in its turn, establishes the presence of the crucified and the resurrected Jesus Christ together with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

## 1. Definition of Basic Concepts

The Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy was prepared and published by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments during the time of St. John Paul II since he was a great promoter of popular piety. The focus at the beginning of this document is rightly placed on the definition of terms, because there are many expressions of what we call popular piety. First of all, together with regular worship and in addition to it, there are a variety of ways that show how to easily and tolerably express and transmit faith »in God, of love for Christ the Redeemer, of invocations of the Holy Spirit, of devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, of the veneration of the Saints of commitment to conversion and of fraternal charity”<sup>7</sup> that flourished in the Catholic Church in the course of centuries.

The term „pious exercise” denotes all »those public or private expressions of Christian piety which, although not part of the Liturgy, are considered to be in harmony with the spirit, norms, and rhythms of the Liturgy. Moreover, such pious exercises are inspired to some degree by the Liturgy and lead the Christian people to the

<sup>3</sup> Francis, id., n. 122.

<sup>4</sup> Francis, id., n. 123.

<sup>5</sup> Francis, id., n. 125.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Francis, id., n. 126.

<sup>7</sup> Congregation for Divine Worship and the *Discipline of the Sacrament, Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccdds\\_doc\\_20020513\\_vers-direttorio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_en.html) [24.04.2018], n. 6.

Liturgy”<sup>8</sup>.

The term „devotions” signifies the „various expressions and attitudes which originate from the inner religious position and show special emphasis in the relationship of the faithful with the Divine Persons, or the Blessed Virgin Mary in her privileges of grace and those of her titles which express them, or with the Saints in their configuration with Christ or in their role in the Church’s life”<sup>9</sup>.

The term „popular religiosity” used in some documents to mark the reality of „popular piety” under the Directory signifies a general human experience of the transcendental dimension within its own culture, society, and history that is not necessarily related to the Christian revelation. For this reason, the Directory consistently uses the term „popular piety” and not „religion of the people” that expresses only one part of the reality of popular piety<sup>10</sup>.

The term „popular piety” thus signifies „diverse cultic expressions of a private or community nature which, in the context of the Christian faith, are inspired predominantly not by the Sacred Liturgy but by forms deriving from a particular nation or people or from their culture”<sup>11</sup>.

Briefly, we can define popular piety as a set of specific expressions of search for God and the realization of the religious life of the people of God, often filled with zeal and purposefully pure intentions<sup>12</sup>.

The word tradition derives from the Latin word *traditio*, see *tradere* that literally means transferring, handing over, feeding. Above all, it denotes the tradition, something that ancestors bring to the next generation and they give it to you. This refers to everything that was stabilized in the life of a community, including the religious life, transferring from one generation to another, or to an established, long-lasting activity<sup>13</sup>.

In the Catholic Church, we are talking about different traditions. The apostolic tradition „comes from the apostles and hands on what they received from Jesus’ teaching and example and what they learned from the Holy Spirit”<sup>14</sup>. This tradition, however, differs from „the various theological, disciplinary, liturgical or devotional traditions, born in the local churches over time. These are the particular forms, adapted to different places and times, in which the great Tradition is expressed”<sup>15</sup>.

In this paper, we will focus on the tradition of piety, which is different across the local Churches, because the expression of enculturation is variable of the gospel and

<sup>8</sup> Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, id., n. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, id., n. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, id., n. 6, footnote 9.

<sup>11</sup> Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, id., n. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, id., n.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. P. Roszak, *Credibilidad e identidad. En torno a la Teología de la Fe en Santo Tomas de Aquino*. Pamplona 2014, p. 139.

<sup>14</sup> *Catechismus of the Catholic Church*, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM) [25.04.2018], n. 83.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

apostolic tradition in individual peoples or ethical communities and their culture. Therefore, the original mission of tradition is to pass on the apostolic tradition, that is, the teachings of Jesus and the example and spiritual experience of the apostles, which they saw, heard, touched, tried (1 Jn 1:1-3), and the original Church. Thus, when the tradition implements this, we are talking about the living tradition or tradition of Life, because it preserves and gives forward to Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 14: 6). However, when this tradition only preserves certain customs and habits, or even when there are various deviations and abuses of the tradition of human devotion, we can speak of a „dead” tradition or a tradition of „death”, because it no longer leads to the fullness of life in Christ, but rather away from him.

## 2. The Preciousness of Popular Piety: A Living Tradition

When presenting the Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy, Cardinal Medina Estévez (2002) made it clear that popular piety is a reality, „which is part of the living tradition of the Church”<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, what makes this tradition alive is the incorporation into the living tradition of the Church. In addition, without some form of popular piety, such as the rosary or the Way of the Cross, it is impossible to imagine the history of Catholic spirituality, because it would have been impoverished without it. Together with his predecessors, Pope Francis sees popular piety as the treasure of the Church that should not be abandoned<sup>17</sup>. By summing up the teachings of the last four popes, we can see the preciousness of the living tradition of human devotion in the following:

1. *Popular piety enables the confession of faith and life by faith.* In some periods of the history of the Catholic Church, especially immediately after the Second Vatican Council, some people viewed popular piety with disbelief. Although the blessed Pope Paul VI was aware of the various dangers that this devotion could lead to, he clearly alerted the entire Church on behalf of all the bishops who were assembled at the synod of 1974 that they should no longer look at these expressions of loyalty as something inferior or even despise them. Moreover, in his Apostolic Letter *Evangelii nuntiandi*, he even emphasized that popular piety in itself has many values in which people train for generosity and self-sacrifice when it comes to the profession of faith, and sharpens the sense of unchallenged divine qualities<sup>18</sup>. St Pope John Paul II has repeatedly stressed that because of the wealth of symbols, signs and gestures, it captures the believer in all its dimensions of religious and eve-

<sup>16</sup> M. Estévez, *Popular Piety and the Life of Faith*, <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=4614> [27.04.2018].

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Francis, id., n. 123.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Paul IV, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi*, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html) [20.04.2018], n. 48b.d.

ryday life. In his Apostolic Letter *Vicesimus quintus annus*, he emphasizes: „Popular devotion should not be ignored or treated with indifference or contempt, because it is rich in values, and per se expresses the religious attitude towards God”<sup>19</sup>.

2. *Popular piety originates from liturgy and leads to liturgy*. The Catechism of the Catholic Church considers popular pieties as an extension of the liturgical life of the Church and not as a replacement to it<sup>20</sup>. Popular pieties should be consecrated with sacred worship. On the one hand, they should originate from it, and on the other hand, they should lead to it.
3. *The cleansing and creative power of human devotion*. Pope Francis emphasizes the urgent need to evangelize culture and stresses how every culture and society needs everyday purification and maturation. He points out that even in the folk cultures of Catholic populations, „we can see deficiencies which need to be healed by the Gospel: machismo, alcoholism, domestic violence, low Mass attendance, fatalistic or superstitious notions which lead to sorcery, and the like”<sup>21</sup>. He is convinced that human devotion can be the best »starting point for healing and liberation from these deficiencies”<sup>22</sup>. Genuine popular piety guides man from one man to another and evangelizes relationships, builds communion: „Journeying together to shrines and taking part in other manifestations of popular piety, also by taking one’s children or inviting others, is in itself an evangelizing gesture”<sup>23</sup>.
4. *Popular piety – embodied spirituality*. The South American bishops have recognized the true „a spirituality incarnated in the culture of the lowly”<sup>24</sup> in popular piety. Many South American believers express their faith precisely through popular piety which is why the bishops rightly call it „popular spirituality” or „the people’s mysticism”<sup>25</sup>. The Pope emphasizes that popular piety »discovers and expresses that content more by way of symbols than by discursive reasoning, and in the act of faith greater accent is placed on credere in Deum than on credere Deum. It is „legitimate way of living the faith, a way of feeling part of the Church and a manner of being missionaries”<sup>26</sup>. Popular piety enables a person to live his faith in the concrete reality, to connect the private and public life of believers that is essential to any genuine Christian spirituality. Popular piety also involves man in his integrity,

<sup>19</sup> John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter Vicesimus Quintus Annus*, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1988/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19881204\\_vicesimus-quintus-annus.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19881204_vicesimus-quintus-annus.html) [15.04.2018], n. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 436.

<sup>21</sup> Francis, id., n. 69.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Francis, id., n. 124.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

because it encourages him to build a relationship with God with your body, soul, and spirit, and it prevents him from limiting the spirituality to mere intellectualism, voluntarism, or sentimentalism.

5. *Evangelizing power of popular piety.* Pope Francis states that „once the Gospel has been enculturated in a people, in their process of transmitting their culture they also transmit the faith in ever new forms”<sup>27</sup>. Therefore, it encourages Christians to be aware that evangelization is actually enculturation. Thus, every nation or ethnic group as part of the people of God testifies to the faith received and enriches it with new expressions when it transfers the gift of God into its life in accordance with its spirit. In this aspect, an important role is played by popular piety, which is »a true expression of the spontaneous missionary activity of the people of God. This is an ongoing and developing process, of which the Holy Spirit is the principal agent”<sup>28</sup>. According to Pope Francis, it is precisely in popular piety that we can understand the way in which people who have accepted the Christian faith in their culture have taken on the character of their religion and are continuously giving it away<sup>29</sup>.

### 3. Possible Deviations of Popular Piety: A Dead Tradition

All the Popes beginning with the beatified Paul VI to the present Pope Francis are clearly aware that popular piety is always in danger of becoming a kind of external custom or habit without the content that would lead the individual into a personal relationship with God and give him the power to live in it and with him in the midst of the world. Other deviations are also possible to transform the tradition of popular piety into a „dead” tradition, the tradition of „death”, because it no longer leads to the fullness of life.

1. *Attention only to external forms of popular piety and entrapment in traditionalism and individualism.* Pope Francis is aware that sometimes the center of gravity of some popular piety is more on the outer form of the tradition of certain groups, or „on alleged private revelations which would replace all else”<sup>30</sup>. Thus, it can happen that Christianity becomes a Christianity of merely pious exercises. Surely, popular piety based on an individual and emotionally driven way of life of faith »does not in fact correspond to authentic „popular piety”«<sup>31</sup>. Jesus reminds his disciples of similar dangers when he warns against prayer that would only become a blasphemy (Mt 6: 7), and against doing something that would only be seen on the outside, because they would abandon more important things: justice, mercy, and loyalty (Mt

<sup>27</sup> Francis, id., n. 122.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Francis, id., n. 123.

<sup>30</sup> Francis, id., n. 70.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

23:22.25) The warning given by the apostle Paul that the letter kills, »but the Spirit brings life« (2 Cor 3:6) can also be understood as an incentive that Christians should not be satisfied only with the outer form of popular piety and overlook its Spirit. When popular piety is performed, it must not fall into traditionalism just because it was always performed this way, because it is an established custom, or because it is so beautiful and interesting. However, its main message, the content, and the possibility of deepening personal faith and life in the spirit of Christianity are overlooked. Nor can popular piety be genuine if it does not open up and does not encourage believers to strive for social progress, and does not form them into mature and responsible believers and citizens. Those who pay attention only to the external form of popular piety often seek material gain in doing so, or seek to gain power over others<sup>32</sup>. Research also shows that many popular pieties are unfortunately very individualistic and often have the aim of just satisfying their own interests. If so, piety necessarily becomes superficial and distorted<sup>33</sup>.

2. *Emotions and other distortions in „popular piety”*. The motives for popular piety can soon be feelings of helplessness in the face of life events, seeking protection, the desire for certainty, not trusting in God’s help, and worshipping God. In this search, people often quickly resort to pious exercises where they know exactly what needs to be done in order to achieve what they are looking for. They can quickly fall into the temptation of taking the relationship with God and having their prayers answered under their control. Unfortunately, popular piety is, as the blessed Pope Paul VI warns, „often subject to penetration by many distortions of religion and even superstitions. It frequently remains at the level of forms of worship not involving a true acceptance by faith. It can even lead to the creation of sects and endanger the true ecclesial community”<sup>34</sup>. Some piety can lead people to accept various signs, gestures, or forms magically. Superstition, which is a misconception of religious feeling and the actions that this emotion entails, has always been present in Christianity. The Catechism of the Catholic Church emphasizes that this is especially true at the time „when one attributes an importance in some way magical to certain practices otherwise lawful or necessary. To attribute the efficacy of prayers or of sacramental signs to their mere external performance, apart from the interior dispositions that they demand, is to fall into superstition (Mt 23: 16-22)”<sup>35</sup>. The Directory also warns against this or similar misconception: »What is said of the Christian Liturgy is also true of popular piety: ,it may never incorporate rites permeated by magic, super-

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Cf. W.C. Spohn, *Christian Spirituality and Theological Ethics*, in: A. Holder (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, Malden 2011, p. 281-282.

<sup>34</sup> Paul IV, *id.*, n. 48c.

<sup>35</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2111.



stitution, animism, vendettas or sexual connotations'«<sup>36</sup>.

3. *The dominance of popular piety over liturgy.* The Directory warns against the unbelief that human devotion is so greatly valued and glorified that the liturgy begins to be neglected, pushed into a secondary role, or even destroyed<sup>37</sup>. Thus, the liturgy »is no longer the ,summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed; [and].the fount from which all her power flows'. Rather it becomes a cultic expression extraneous to the comprehension and sensibility of the people«<sup>38</sup>. In this context, one or the other one-sided statements are heard: „Popular piety is sufficient for the free and spontaneous celebration of ,Life' and its multiplicity of expressions«; Popular piety »speaks directly to man, involves his body, heart and mind«; »Popular piety is an authentic and real locus for the life of prayer"; „The ritual with which popular piety is expressed is one which is received and accepted by the faithful because of its correspondence between their cultural expectations and ritual language"<sup>39</sup>.
4. *The emphasis on atonement.* The analysis of the results of the survey *Sacrifice in Christian Spirituality*<sup>40</sup> showed that the understanding of the sacrifice as atonement is present among Christians in Slovenia, especially among those who practice piety to the Mary of Fatima or the souls of the victim, etc. Such understanding of sacrifice is very problematic. The atonement theory distorts both the correct understanding of the Christian sacrifice and the image of God<sup>41</sup>. This theory also promotes the spirituality of sacrifice that prevents Christians from fully realizing the Trinitarian and evangelical spirituality, in which sacrifice lives in the spirit of free and free self-giving love in a relationship between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Living giving love is an indicator and an essential element of Christian faith and Trinitarian spirituality.

#### 4. The Need for Pastoral Love and the Wise Pastoral Discernment and Action

The Holy Pope John Paul II warned against underestimating popular piety, especially by the „elite" Christians and „devoted" shepherds, and considering them too shallow and incomplete. Therefore, he reminded the shepherds of the Church that they must always be aware that the Church must never confine itself to the spiritual

<sup>36</sup> Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, id., n. 12.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, id., n. 51.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, id., n. 53.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. I. Platovnjak, *Sacrifice in Christian spirituality*, „Bogoslovni vestnik" 76/2 (2016), p. 250-261.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. T. Stegu, *Victim, the Paschal Mystery and Homily in Slovenia*, „Bogoslovni vestnik" 76/2 (2016), p. 393-404.

or apostolic »elite«, but must be open to all the people of God<sup>42</sup>.

Pope Francis also warns the entire Church not to do violence to this missionary power and not to seize control over it<sup>43</sup>. At the same time, he invites the Church to bring this reality closer „with the gaze of the Good Shepherd”<sup>44</sup>. This is further strengthened by the words: „Only from the affective connaturality born of love can we appreciate the theological life present in the piety of Christian peoples, especially among their poor” and then: „No one who loves God’s holy people will view these actions as the expression of a purely human search for the divine. They are the manifestation of a theological life nourished by the working of the Holy Spirit who has been poured into our hearts (cf. Rom 5:5)”<sup>45</sup>. Therefore, the one who underestimates the popular piety underestimates its evangelizing power and the operation of the Holy Spirit in it, in order to promote and strengthen it, thus deepening the enculturation process that is never complete<sup>46</sup>.

Surely, the pastoral workers, especially the bishops, must not turn their eyes away from the possible distortions of the popular piety that we have discussed above. They must always approach it not only in the spirit of the good Shepherd, that is, with pastoral love, but also in the spirit of the wise pastoral discernment and guidance and, above all, evangelization. Saint Pope John Paul II stresses that popular piety »needs to be continually evangelized, so that the faith which it expresses may become an ever more mature and authentic act«<sup>47</sup>. It is very important to know the value of popular piety, to care for its true content, to cleanse, where necessary, to understand the deeper in the light of the Bible and to direct to liturgy, without opposing each other<sup>48</sup>.

The best „cure” for popular piety is God’s Word, because it gives it content and direction. The Directory clearly states that, in the biblical word, popular piety can find an inexhaustible source of inspiration, an acceptable form of prayer and proposals rich with content. The Bible helps believers to find a guide and a measure of balancing enthusiasm often reflected by popular piety, thereby giving space to »ambiguous or even erroneous expressions of piety”<sup>49</sup>, and to prioritize listening to the God who speaks<sup>50</sup>.

It is necessary for believers to know that the liturgy is superior to all other possible and lawful forms of Christian prayer. For a life in Christ, the sacramental acts are something urgent, whereas the forms of popular piety are deemed optional. A proof

<sup>42</sup> Cf. A. Verwillghen, *La religiosità popolare nei documenti del Magistero della chiesa dal Vaticano II ad oggi*, in: S. Semerano ed alt. (ed.), *Religiosità popolare a misura dei giovani*, Leumann (Torino) 1987, p. 63-65. The author very thoroughly analyzes many speeches of St. Pope John Paul II on popular piety.

<sup>43</sup> Francis, id., n. 124.

<sup>44</sup> Francis, id., n. 125.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> John Paul II, id., n. 18.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. M. Estévez, id.

<sup>49</sup> Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, id., n. 87.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, id., n. 89.

for this is highlighted in the command of participation in the Sunday Holy Mass, whereas there was never any obligation to observe popular piety<sup>51</sup>.

The fact that popular piety is optional does not mean that it is irrelevant, as we have already seen above. In accordance with the renewal brought by the Second Vatican Council in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, it is necessary to discover the following in popular piety: liturgical inspiration, biblical inspiration, ecumenical inspiration, and anthropological inspiration<sup>52</sup>. If such an inspiration is not detected, this is a serious indicator that there might be something wrong with popular piety. However, in the context of evaluation, it is always necessary to take into account the circumstances, the place, and the culture from which the human devotion originated.

The difference between liturgy and human devotion must be clearly visible from the outside. The forms that are inherent in liturgical tasks and the forms that are inherent in popular piety are not allowed to mix<sup>53</sup>. This could lead to unnecessary confusion and unrest among believers. It is also necessary to avoid any competition or opposition to liturgical tasks. The hierarchy is clear: Sunday, solemn holidays, and liturgical times have priority. It should also be borne in mind that liturgy would not be adapted to individual popular piety (for example, that the Holy Mass begins later, because the prayer of the Rosary before the Holy Mass has not ended yet). In this aspect, profound wisdom is required of pastoral workers. On the one hand, it is necessary to maintain order; on the other hand, excessive rigorism and „chipping” of devotion can be counterproductive among believers and could even extinguish their faith.

The first in line who are responsible for healthy popular piety in particular Churches are local bishops. It is also necessary for them to take care of the appropriate catechesis. Such a catechesis is indispensable and must clearly express the Trinitarian, Christological, and Ceremonial character. In doing so, they should be aware of the different circumstances in view of the different feelings of individual persons<sup>54</sup>. It is always necessary to bear in mind that the Second Vatican Council pointed out that „the spiritual life, however, is not limited solely to participation in the Liturgy”<sup>55</sup>, but that it is also fed on the devotion of the Christian people, “especially those commended by the Apostolic See and practiced in the particular Churches by mandate of the Bishop or by his approval”<sup>56</sup>.

A glance at history can help us to understand what happens in the case of a lack of

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, id., n. 11.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, id., n. 12.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, id., n. 13.

<sup>54</sup> Congregation for the Clergy, id., n. 169.

<sup>55</sup> Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 12, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html) [15.4.2018].

<sup>56</sup> Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, *Decree*, Prot. N. 1532/00/L, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccdds\\_doc\\_20020513\\_vers-direttorio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_en.html) [24.04.2018].

thorough catechesis. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, the poor education of people gave rise to an injurious dualism in Christianity when liturgy and popular piety underwent a crisis. In the liturgy, the secondary elements dominated at the expense of the central elements. Due to absence of thorough education of the people, exaggerations and fallacies arose in the popular piety<sup>57</sup>. At that time, this dualism was more or less successfully resolved through the liturgical reform of the Tridentine Council. Today, we too face similar problems and challenges, and the solutions are at the same level as centuries ago: careful and persistent pastoral and catechesis work so that the relationship between liturgy and human devotion can be as perfect as possible.

The catechesis seeking to maintain a healthy relationship between liturgy and popular piety must repeatedly emphasize the importance of the community. The emphasis on the community and the building of relations through human devotion as well must therefore be the fundamental component of every catechism<sup>58</sup>. We should not forget that a man of genuine spiritual life cannot live on his own with no regard for others, without forming a community and responsibility towards others and the environment.

Preserved popular piety must inspire pastoral workers with gratefulness to God, because the existence of these devotions indicates that people at least have a certain degree of relationship with God and the Church<sup>59</sup>. Through these devotions, they can approach these people and help them with their own pastoral activity, which includes catechesis, helping them to grow in faith, hope, and love, and to become mature and responsible interlocutors and associates of God. Pastoral workers must always bear in mind that the genuine forms of popular piety are the work of the Holy Spirit<sup>60</sup>, and that through them believers, being active members of the Church, can make their prophetic, priestly, and royal service and worship God in spirit and truth (Jn 3, 23)<sup>61</sup>. The Holy Spirit is the one who calls, acts, converts, and leads through popular piety. Man answers in secret in his heart in a way that pastoral workers can easily overlook if they do not approach him in the spirit of the shepherd's love and a wise and patient spiritual discernment.

## Conclusion

In various way, Church teaching encourages the entire Church, especially the

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<sup>57</sup> Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, n. 33.

<sup>58</sup> Congregation for the Clergy, id., n. 27, 48-49; Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, n. 268.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. P. Roszak, *Pilgrimage as sacramentum peregrinationis? Discovering the Ecclesiological Background of the Camino de Santiago*, in: E. Alarcon, P. Roszak (ed.), *The Way of St. James: Renewing Insights*, Pamplona 2017, p. 137-157.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, n. 83.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, n. 85-86.

bishops and all pastoral workers, to be aware of the universal importance and preciousness of popular piety for pastoral work, because they themselves evangelize and enculturate the gospel, and at the same time often provide the opportunity for new evangelism and catechesis. Thus, the great tradition of popular piety will become ever more alive and will lead the believer to the fullness of life in the Trinity God in the communion of the Church. Surely, many popular pieties need a new framework in accordance with the principles and guidelines<sup>62</sup> provided by the Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy, as well as in the specific instructions in their other types of work<sup>63</sup> (CD 93-287). Otherwise, the devotions of popular piety quickly become a dead tradition or a tradition of „death”.

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, n. 11-13. 60-92.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, n. 93-287.

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