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BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO DO NOT KNOW THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH. A PLEA FOR NEGATIVE ECCLESIOLOGY

Corona has been (and still is) an unpleasant confrontation with, e.g., human frailty and global inequality. That confrontation also affects the Church. The empty church buildings during the pandemic's first wave were a painful shock: is this the future that awaits the church? Yet for the church in the West, the empty churches of the pandemic are in fact no more than a short-term crisis. The real, long-term crisis is the relentless decrease of church attendance and the equally relentless increase of the average age of churchgoers and volunteers; both developments have been going on for decades.

Various pastors and theologians have engaged with the painful, inescapable question of the future of the church by formulating the church's current mission. These include, for example, the Czech priest and theologian Tomáš Halík and the Canadian parish priest James Mallon, both of whom are bestseller authors. Yet what is often absent in reflections such as theirs is the virtue of 'not-knowing'.

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Therefore, by way of complement, in this contribution I will argue for ‘not-knowing’ the future of the churching’ too much the future of the church, so that God can illumine our understanding. One might qualify this as ‘negative ecclesiology’, or, with the American theologian Paul Lakeland’s lovely word, speak of an ecclesiology rooted in the “grace of self-doubt”.²

In what follows, I will first elaborate the significance of ‘not-knowing’. Next, I will dwell on the trinitarian roots of negative theology. To demonstrate that a negative theological approach is also fruitful in other domains than trinitarian theology, I will then discuss Ignatian spiritual accompaniment, in which a reverent ‘not-knowing’ about God’s interaction with the directee is crucial. Finally, focusing on synodality, I elaborate not-knowing in the more communal space of the church. While the context of this argument typically reflects the Western world and its reality of secularisation, the grace of not-knowing and the reverence for God’s mystery should be relevant universally.³

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ‘NOT-KNOWING’

According to a human habit that probably has to do with survival, traumas provoke a search for strategies and solutions. Interpretations play an important role in that search, for by understanding causes we may conceive of solutions. This holds also true for the shock of empty churches, both in its short-term manifestation due to corona manifestation and its long-term manifestation due to secularization.

² P. Lakeland, *Reflections on the ‘Grace of Self-Doubt’*, in: D.M. Doyle, T.J. Furry, P.D. Bazzell (ed.), *Ecclesiology and Exclusion. Boundaries of Being and Belonging in Postmodern Times*, Maryknoll, NY: 2012, p. 13-17; he owes the term to Margaret Farley, Professor Emerita of Christian Ethics.

³ This contribution is a substantially reworked version of J. Moons, *Zalig zij die het niet weten. En zalig die kerken sluiten*, in: L. Feijen (ed.), *Kerk in tijden van corona*, Baarn 2020, p. 82-91. It uses some of the ideas in my talk for the Peter & Paul Seminar, „Synodality and Discernment. The Pneumatological and Affective Reconfiguration of the Church”, which is yet to be published.

Here lies the merit of Halík and Mallon: they provide an interpretation and a strategy or solution. In an opinion article that was published in newspapers all over the globe, Halík suggested that the empty churches of the corona crisis are a wake-up call, a call to conversion and, as such, a moment of ‘kairos’.⁴ In his view, the church needs to be humbler, more gospel-oriented, and more constructive in its dialogue with the world. Responding to the more general crisis of secularisation, Mallon has developed a model of re-building and re-vitalising parishes.⁵ In a way very different from Halík, Mallon focuses on deepening the parishioner’s faith commitment.

While it is to be applauded that theologians and pastors engage with contemporary issues, speaking always comes with a risk. As it implies an assessment and commits to a view, it closes off – at least for a moment – other views or interpretations. This raises an important question, namely: how can speaking be sufficiently open for new views and, ultimately, for God? How to make sure we actually hear God’s call to conversion? That question is even more pertinent in light of the conviction with which many authors – including those mentioned above – propose, ironically, quite different interpretations of the church in our day.

Formulated in terms of criticism: in many contemplations of the meaning of the corona crisis and in many considerations on the future of the church, the virtue of ‘not knowing’ is absent. Most reflections do not contain sufficient silence, understood as reverently keeping quiet before the mystery of God, the mystery of the human

⁴ Published on 3 April 2020 in, e.g., the American Jesuit weekly *America Magazine*, cf. online at <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/04/03/christianity-time-sickness>. Halík published his homilies on corona in German in the book T. Halík, *Die Zeit der leeren Kirchen: Von der Krise zur Vertiefung des Glaubens*, Freiburg 2021. Cf. also, W. Kasper, G. Augustin (ed.), *Christsein und die Corona-Krise. Das Leben bezeugen in einer sterblichen Welt*, Ostfildern 2020.

⁵ Mallon has published various books and initiated a movement, ‘Divine Renovation’, that is spreading all over the world. It all started with the ‘signature book’, J. Mallon, *Divine Renovation. Bringing Your Parish from Maintenance to Mission*, New London 2014.

person, nature, and so on. Such a lack of silence and ‘not knowing’ is problematic for religious, theological reasons. Who already knows what, e.g., the corona crisis means or how to respond to secularisation, no longer needs to seek, to listen and to receive. Has God still the chance to say something to such a person? Therefore, I could not agree more with the widely read Anglican bishop and theologian Tom Wright, who published a book on the Corona crisis with the aim *not* to offer solutions. “Before we can answer (...), we need a time of lament, of restraint, of precisely not jumping to ‘solutions’. These may come, God willing, but unless we retreat from our instant reactions, we may not be able to hear them”.⁶

THE TRINITY AND NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

Not knowing, or, in more theologian terms, negative theology, is an established theological approach that is usually especially part of trinitarian theology. Major theologians such as Augustin (354-430) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) have advocated the humble acknowledgement that God is beyond human comprehension. Augustine’s famous line ‘if you understand it, it is not God’ has been handed on in various versions. For example, in his wonderful *Sermo 52 on the Trinity*, the master orator said:

For what are we to say, brothers [and sisters], about God? For if you have fully grasped what you want to say, it isn’t God. If you have been able to comprehend it, you have comprehended something else instead of God. If you think you have been able to understand, your thoughts have deceived you.⁷

⁶ T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic. A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath*, London 2020.

⁷ *Sermo 52,16*, in Augustine, *Sermons 51-94 on the New Testament (The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century)*, E. Hill (transl.), Brooklyn 1991, p. 50-65, at 57. Cf. G. Emery, *Trinitarian Theology as a Spiritual Exercise*

And yet, paradoxically, Augustine spoke. In fact, he said many things about God, yet he always remained conscious of the fact that the ultimate word about God was beyond his reach. For example, he introduced his comparison with the human person's 'trinity' of memory, understanding and will by warning: "Take note, I begin by insisting that what I'm going to say is very, very remote from God".⁸ And in the conclusion of the same homily, he is reported to have pondered, "Let's leave something as well to people's reflections, let's generously allow something also to silence".⁹ Augustine's attitude was, in the words of the Dutch Augustine scholar Paul van Geest, "firm yet unsure" (*stellig maar onzeker*).¹⁰

Thomas Aquinas too is keenly aware of the limitations to his ability to make sense of God. For example, the British theologian Karen Kilby has demonstrated that in his quite abstract and technical discussion of the Trinity, Aquinas leaves open various "theological dead ends".¹¹ Her aim in doing so, however, is not to dismiss Aquinas by exposing his weaknesses, but to argue for accepting the limits of theology, just as Aquinas has done.

I want to show that the principle of charity in interpretation need *not* require us to suppose that Thomas was himself able to make sense of everything he said about the Trinity, because it might in fact be a virtue rather than a weakness of trinitarian theology to leave certain things radically, and very clearly, unexplained.¹²

in Augustine and Aquinas, in: *Aquinas the Augustinian*, Washington 2007, p. 1-40, esp. Knowing 'a Little Bit', p. 10-12.

⁸ Augustine, *Sermons 51-94*, Sermo 52.19, at 59.

⁹ Augustine, *Sermons 51-94*, Sermo 52.22, at 61.

¹⁰ P. van Geest, *Stellig maar onzeker. Augustinus' benadering van God*, Budel 2007; see his discussion of Sermo 52 at 138-142.

¹¹ K. Kilby, *Aquinas, the Trinity and the Limits of Understanding*, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (2005), p. 414-427, 418.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 418-419. Cf. also, p. 423, „If in fact the doctrine of the Trinity is simply beyond our grasp, then it may be better, more helpful, for theology to display this

The conviction that God is both beyond us and with us, is not merely a difficult, somewhat philosophical issue, related to something as abstract as trinitarian theology, but is part and parcel of salvation history. It is the God encountered in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit who is different – and different *in a different manner*. The humility and openness that characterise negative theology are therefore as vital for abstract thinking about the Trinity and a Christian's actual life with God. It should therefore shape not only trinitarian theology but also anthropology and spiritual theology. Ignatian spirituality provides a strong example of the fact that it does indeed do so.

IGNATIAN SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT AND NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

Ignatian spirituality inherits from the Modern Devotion a strong awareness of the reality of God's interaction with us. As is commonly known, the Modern Devotion promoted mental prayer, that is, prayer not with words but with the mind and the imagination. This type of prayer facilitates one's intimate interaction with God. Convinced of the depth of this interaction, Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) – founding father of the Jesuits – recommends spiritual directors to be reticent. Instead of pushing directees to a specific form of life, spiritual directors should assist in establishing 'direct contact between Creator and creature'. In his own words:

It is more appropriate and far better that the Creator and Lord himself should communicate himself to the devout soul embracing it in love and praise, and disposing it for the way which will enable the soul to serve him better in the future. Accordingly, the one giving the Exercises ought not to lean or incline in either direction but rather, while standing by like the pointer of a scale in

quite clearly, than to skirt the issue, to bluff its way along. And this, I am suggesting, is what Thomas is doing".

the equilibrium, to allow the Creator to deal immediately with the creature and the creature with its Creator and Lord.¹³

The same focus on the directee's 'own' and real relationship with God is noticeable at many other instances of the Spiritual Exercises. For example, retreatants are called to end each prayer with a "colloquy", that is, a dialogue with God (or Jesus, or Mary) as with a friend: in which one both listens and speaks.¹⁴ The reality of this relationship is also obvious from the focus on inner movements: the encounter with God is supposed to provoke something in one's soul.¹⁵

It is not difficult to uncover the implicit negative theology: in the same way as the mystery of the Trinity is beyond a human being's grasp, so too is the relationship between God and the directee. Therefore, the director should facilitate the relationship between the directee and God rather than direct the directee. To do so, the spiritual director should be profoundly interested in the other person's soul and life, explore what is happening, propose good practices that the directee might well try, introduce some general rules, and suggest interpretations.¹⁶

¹³ *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius. A Translation and Commentary by George E. Ganss*, no. 15., St. Louis 1992. Note in this text that Ignatius does not use the word 'spiritual director', but rather speaks of 'the one giving the Exercises'. Elsewhere I contend that reverence and restraint are therefore quintessential elements of Ignatian spiritual accompaniment, see J. Moons, *The Art of Spiritual Direction. A Guide to Ignatian Practice*, Mahway, NY 2021, esp. chapter 2, „Core Values: An Ignatian Perspective on Spiritual Direction”, p. 15-36.

¹⁴ See for example *Spiritual Exercises* no. 53-54, 61, 109. For background, see G. Arana, *Coloquios*, in: J. García de Castro a.o. (ed.), *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Ignaciana*, Bilbao 2007, p. 341-346.

¹⁵ See for example no. 6, 17 and the Rules for Discernment, no. 313-336. Cf. J. García de Castro, *Moción*, *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Ignaciana*, p. 1265-1269.

¹⁶ For guidance of the director's attitude and action, see the introductory Annotations, *Spiritual Exercises* no. 1-20. For background, see, J.D. Cuesta, *Accompanimiento*, *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Ignaciana*, p. 79-84.

The underlying attitude is best described as “wisely ignorant” (*sapienter imprudens*). The word was used by one of the first Jesuits, Jerome Nadal (1507-1580), in a fictitious dialogue in which a certain Philalethes defends the Jesuits against two other persons; the objective was to defend the Society of Jesus against the Protestants. In this moment of the dialogue, Philalethes (that is, Nadal) discusses the time Ignatius was studying in Paris. Well into his thirties, and having failed his dreams for courtly success and well into his thirties, Ignatius accepted that his future was very open and, thus, was led by the Holy Spirit. His attitude was *imprudens*, for he did not know, and *sapienter*, because in this way the Holy Spirit could guide him: wisely ignorant.¹⁷ The attitude Nadal sketches is undoubtedly partly hagiographical, yet it helpfully exemplifies the type of attitude Ignatian spiritual direction presupposes, and which has deep roots in more general notions about faith and the spiritual life. Because of God’s real yet mysterious interaction with him, Ignatius let go of his certainties. In the same way, God’s real yet mysterious interaction with other human beings demands deep respect and ‘wise ignorance’ of any bystanders, such as, for example, spiritual directors.¹⁸

¹⁷ „Dialogi pro Societate contra haereticos”, *Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu*, vol. 73, Rome 1951, p. 230-280, 252. For historical background, see, p. 220-229. The Latin is equally wonderfully beautiful as impossible to translate, cf. „Quo tempore Lutetiae fuit, non solum studia literarum sectatus est, sed animum simul intendit quo spiritus illum ac divina vocatio ducebat, ad Ordinem religiosum instituendum; tametsi singulari animi modestia ducentem spiritum sequebatur, non praeibat. Itaque deducebatur quo nesciebat suaviter, nec enim de Ordinis institutione tunc cogitabat; et tamen pedetentim ad illum et viam muniebat et iter faciebat, quasi sapienter imprudens, in simplicitate cordis sui in Christo”, at 252, cf. „Sensit a Deo se duci Ignatius, obedivit, domum relinquens et patriam, eo sequens Christum, quo adhuc nesciebat”, at 280.

¹⁸ One wonders, therefore, why the name spiritual directors continues to be used; ‘spiritual companion’ and ‘spiritual accompaniment’ are much more appropriate.

SYNODALITY AND NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

An attitude of reverence and respect for God's transcendence is not only useful for thinking about the Trinity and for informing a style of spiritual accompaniment. Ecclesiology too may benefit of a negative theological approach. After all, God's interaction with human-kind situates itself not only at the level of the individual, as spiritual accompaniment presupposes, but also at the level of the community. In the admittedly Western logic of the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 9, God gathers individual faithful into a community, the people of God.¹⁹ Negative theology highlights the mysterious nature of the Church's origin and destination; both belong to God and, indeed, are God's work. The Church is not her own master and not her own goal.

Yet negative theology also affects theological reflection on the Church's journey between beginning and ending. God accompanies, confirms, corrects, encourages, and strengthens the Church on her pilgrimage. That faith conviction calls for great ecclesial humility and 'wise ignorance'. For example, the Church's sacraments and institutions are both profoundly meaningful and profoundly limited. As *Lumen Gentium* states, they belong to this era and must therefore be constantly relativized; what lasts and what ultimately matters, is only God.²⁰ Yet in the same way as Augustine continued to speak about God after admitting the insufficiency of his words, so the Church too needs to continue appreciating and using its sacraments and institutions.

¹⁹ This is a Western logic in so far as it starts from the individual; in other parts of the world, the community is the natural starting point, not the individual.

²⁰ Thus *Lumen Gentium*, no. 48. This contention is part of the opening section of Chapter 7 on eschatology and the saints. Cf. the Latin text: „Donec tamen fuerint novi coeli et nova terra, in quibus iustitia habitat (see 2 Pt. 3, 13), Ecclesia peregrinans, in suis sacramentis et institutionibus, quae ad hoc aevum pertinent, portat figuram huius saeculi quae praeterit et ipsa inter creaturas degit quae ingemiscunt et parturiunt usque adhuc et exspectant revelationem filiorum Dei (see Rom. 8, 19-22)”.

A particularly strong example of a negative-theological ‘wise ignorance’ in relation to the church is the type of synodality Pope Francis is promoting. Since the early days of his papacy, he has been speaking about synodality, which he wishes to understand in a broad and real sense. The whole of the people of God should be involved. While the participation of the faithful in the Synod on the Family was not very credible, both because their number was limited and because they cannot be considered representative,²¹ the Synod on the Synodality that is underway has explicitly included the consultation of the faithful in its preparation. For that purpose, the synod date was delayed and altered; instead of being a Synod of Bishops in the year 2022, it is a synodal process lasting from 2021 to 2024 and including a process of conversation and discernment at the local level.

Moreover, participants should not be saying ‘the right things’ but speak from the depth of the heart and their faith convictions. In the famous 2013 interview published a few months after his election, Francis spoke of a “real and active consultation”.²² During synods of bishops, the Pope has repeatedly stated that they should not be ‘his master’s voice’ but speak their mind, even if it were to displease him. For example, in 2014, he stated in his opening address “One general and basic condition is this: speaking honestly. Let no one say: ‘I cannot say this, they will think this or this of me...’. It is necessary to say with parrhesia all that one feels.”²³

²¹ For a sharp criticism, see L. Scaraffia, *Dall’ultimo banco. La Chiesa, le donne, il sinodo*, Venezia 2016, translated into French (2016), Spanish (2016) and Dutch (2017).

²² A. Spadaro, *A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis*, America Magazine (September 30, 2013). The interview was published simultaneously in various Jesuit journals around the world. Francis was elected on March 13, 2013.

²³ Pope Francis, „Greeting of Pope Francis to the Synod Fathers during the First General Congregation of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops” (October 6, 2014), online at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141006_padri-sinodali.html. Cf. how the text continues: „After the last Consistory (February 2014), in which the family was discussed, a Cardinal wrote to me, saying: what a shame that several Cardinals did not have the courage to say certain things out of respect for

The objective is not to have a discussion or a theological argument, but to try and listen to the Spirit by humbly listening to one another. As Francis stated in the 2020 interview book with Austen Ivereigh: “What characterizes a synodal path is the role of the Holy Spirit. We listen, we discuss in groups, but above all we pay attention to what the Spirit has to say to us”.²⁴ Over time, the Pope seems to stress more and more the fundamental theological truth underlying synodality, namely that the Spirit is leading the church still, so that we need to listen to the Spirit still. It is not sufficient to believe that the Spirit led the Church in the past, so that we now ‘only’ have to adhere to what was taught then and to the hierarchy who interprets the past. Rather, as the Second Vatican Council said, the Spirit gives a ‘sense of faith’, an intuition, a *sensus fidei* to all the baptised.²⁵

Therefore, synodality requires a specific type of faith: “we cannot speak of synodality unless we accept and live the presence of the Holy Spirit”.²⁶ That faith comes with negative-theological consequences. If the Spirit lives and leads, we must be sufficiently open and ‘doubtful’ (cf. Lakeland) to allow Him to live and lead. In other words, faith in the Holy Spirit must go with an openness to what Francis calls

the Pope, perhaps believing that the Pope might think something else. This is not good, this is not synodality”.

²⁴ A. Ivereigh, *Let us Dream: The Path to a Better Future. Pope Francis in Conversation with Austen Ivereigh*, London 2020, p. 85.

²⁵ See *Lumen Gentium*, no. 12. Remarkably, and sadly, post-conciliar magisterial teaching largely forgot this. Instead, the focus was on the role of the bishops, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Pope. By contrast, academic reflection abounded, cf. the instructive overview of material assembled by John Burkhard and published in *The Heythrop Journal* 34 (1993), 46 (2005), and 47 (2006). Only under Pope Francis, the *sensus fidelium* is making a come back. Earlier I argued that the notion needs to be conceived more deliberately from the Holy Spirit, see, J. Moons, «*Aroused and sustained by the Holy Spirit*»? *A Plea for a Pneumatological Reconsideration of Sensus Fidei on the Basis of Lumen Gentium 12*, *Gregorianum* 99 (2018), p. 271-292.

²⁶ A. Ivereigh, op. cit., p. 86.

“the new things of the Spirit”. True listening happens without “pre-determined agendas”, for “Ours is a God of Surprises”.²⁷

CONCLUSION

What will the future of the church look like? What type of mission should the church commit herself to? Rather than elaborating one more answer to these important questions, I have pleaded for negative ecclesiology and ‘the grace of self-doubt’. This is not to replace the answers that are given, but to safeguard sufficient openness in these answers. By abstaining from certitude, the church may more easily hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches beyond our own, human and therefore narrow minded understandings. My brief discussions on the Trinity, Ignatian spiritual direction and synodality were meant to illustrate that ‘wise ignorance’ and openness to surprises are present in some other dimensions of the Christian faith and theology and may, therefore, be safely adopted in reflections on the future of the church.

A great fruit of negative ecclesiology is that it allows for change, that is, for a new understanding of God and therefore a new understanding of the church. Because the Apostles allowed for uncertainty, they could accept that God’s grace did not require circumcision and Jewish purity regulations – a crucial revolution in the early Christian church.²⁸ Similarly, during the Second Vatican Council the bishops did not insist on using the same words, and were therefore able to embrace another, more pastoral style of magisterial teaching.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid., p. 93. The word featured also in the 2013 interview *A Big Heart Open to God*, in which the Pope is quoted as saying... „God is always a surprise, so you never know where and how you will find him”. Does the Pope know of the bestseller book on Ignatian spirituality by the British Jesuit G. Hughes, *God of Surprises*, London 1985, translated into many languages, including Spanish?

²⁸ See Acts of the Apostles, 10-15.

²⁹ For background, see M. Sievernich, *Die ‘Pastoralität’ des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils*, in: M. Delgado, M. Sievernich (ed.), *Die großen Metaphern des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils. Ihre Bedeutung für heute*, Freiburg 2013, p. 35-58.

In the same way, negative ecclesiology can help the church – its leadership as much as lay faithful – to be open to new perspectives on church and on mission. It may help to confront the painful truth that in the West the omnipresence of the church belongs to a past era and that in the church's role in society is becoming a marginal one. It may help the faithful and church leadership to embrace the task of bringing the number of church buildings more in line with the church's current position in society – that is, to abolish a significant number of churches. Finally, it may help to reconceive the church's prophetic voice into a more dialogical and humble voice, which testifies rather than criticizes, and that is willing to learn as much as to teach.

Key words: Corona, ecclesiology, Ignatian spirituality, negative theology, Pope Francis, synodality

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