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“TO PAINT THE WORLD WITH THE COLOURS OF HOPE”

Theological reflections¹

In giving my paper I would first like to take note of the role of speech and of a word which we use to express thousands of matters. We also use it to talk about God. In the second part I am going to discuss the spiritual condition of Christian Europe today. Finally, in the third part, I am going to point out a few practical conclusions, the rays of hope, crucial for the existence of the civilization of love. I will try to speak clearly, taking into account the fact that, as Luis Alonso Schöckel said: “clarity is charity for the listeners”².

A WORD IS A POWERFUL MASTER

A word, of itself is something so inconspicuous, but it is the tool of human communication. This delicate, subtle, but important and irreplaceable gift of one person to another – is worth a deeper reflection. A word is a powerful master. It can do wonders. We use it to express feelings and emotions: from subtle love to cold and violent hatred. With a word we can create atmosphere, multiple meanings. It encourages and discourages, it gives joy and disconcerts, and it destroys and cures. The magic power of a word lies in its ability to evoke pictures. By its spell persons, close and distant entities and problems which are present in our lives, are conjured up.

“Speech is a powerful master and achieves the most divine feats with the smallest and least evident body. It can stop fear, relieve pain, create

¹ The paper was given at Liverpool Hope University on 28th February 2008 during the meeting of the Hope Theological Society.

² L. Alonso Schökel, J. M. Bravo, *A Manual of Hermeneutics* (The Biblical Seminar 54), Sheffield 1998, p. 171.

joy, and increase pity” as Gorgias of Leontini, the most famous sophist, wrote in his well known *Encomium of Helen*³ in the 5th century B.C.

The effects of speech, of a word, on the mind and listeners’ souls were compared by ancient Greeks with the effects of drugs on the human body. We know that some medicine can cure various diseases, but others can harm. The same can be said about words: some of them gladden, others sadden; some of them frighten, others bolster up our courage.

Gorgias and others believed in the power of a word. In ancient Greece that faith gave birth to the rhetoric – the art of beautiful speeches and persuasion.

The Greeks had ears sensitive to a spoken word. They experienced a unique, aesthetic delight when listening to those who were good at making speeches. The Greeks admired the inventiveness, and virtuosity in using a word, the rich imagination and speakers’ gestures. The Hellenic culture was for centuries a typical culture of speech based on tradition and oral transmissions. It developed the cult of the living word. The skill of making a speech was then a part of education (*paideia*).

Also Christianity – the religion of “the Word which became flesh” – as said St. John (1,14), treats a word as a great gift of God. By means of a word it has been propagating the Gospel about God who “loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life” (John 3,16).

The same cannot be said about the word used by a man and the word of God. The word written in newspapers, spoken on television, or on the radio often lives one day only and next day it is as valuable as a withered leaf. And the word of God? It – as the Bible says – lasts for ever.

TO BE CLOSER TO GOD

We are living in a world of fantastic discoveries. Man travels through space and learns the secrets of the universe. Man knows the human genome. Yet, state-of-the-art microscopes and telescopes which can read the secrets of the world cannot discover the answer to why we live, why we cry, why we die, or what the sense of our lives is. Today these questions are pushed aside to the perimeter of our lives and our consciousness. In a world created by the media, references to God appear very rarely. Para-

³ L. Versényi, *Socratic Humanism*, London 1963, s. 94: “an essay on the nature and power of logos”. See: A. Michel, *La rhétorique, sa vocation et ses problèmes: sources antiques et médiévales*, [in:] *Histoire de la rhétorique dans l’Europe moderne 1450–1950*, Paris 1999, p. 18–20.

doxically our sight has become weaker and shorter and our spiritual horizon has very often been limited to what can be seen and is tangible.

A man of today cannot choose to go behind the horizon outlined for him, cannot penetrate the colourful layer of images and matter. The crucial questions are left without answers... But what is important is invisible to the eye. “Ce qui est important, ça ne se voit pas [...]” – these words which Antoine de Saint Exupéry in his famous *Le petit prince* puts into the mouth of the Little Prince.

Thus, it is very important to have the circle of our lives open to the supernatural, to God. It is only the Christ who can give us the answer to our most crucial existential questions. It is only Him who has the words of eternal life.

An outstanding Polish film director Krzysztof Kieślowski (died 1996) worked on ten films on the commandments of the Decalogue. In the film on the first commandment shows a scene in which a young boy asks his mother: “Who is God?”. As an answer the mother takes the child into her arms, cuddles him and asks: “What do you feel now?”. “I feel good. I love you” – answers the boy. “This is what God means” – says the mother. The dialogue between the mother and the child casts a lot of light into the sphere of spiritual life and it proves in a simple way that God is love.

We need peace, quiet, a prayer, finding the final and deepest life truths, the renewed birth of the spirit. A lot of spiritual experiences are given by the film which was shown in 2006 entitled *Into great silence*.

It is an outstanding recording of everyday life of the monks living in the monastery of the Grande Chartreuse, situated in the French Alps, close to Grenoble.

The Grande Chartreuse is considered one of the world’s most ascetic monasteries. In 1984, German filmmaker Philip Gröning wrote to the Carthusian order for permission to make a documentary about them. They said they would get back to him. Sixteen years later, they were ready. Gröning, without crew or artificial lighting, lived in the monks’ quarters for six months – filming their daily prayers, tasks, rituals and rare outdoor excursions. This transcendent, closely observed film seeks to embody a monastery, rather than simply depict one – it has no score, no voiceover and no archival footage. What remains is stunningly elemental: time, space and light. One of the most mesmerizing and poetic chronicles of spirituality ever created, *Into great silence* dissolves the border between screen and audience with a total immersion into the hush of monastic life.

The motto of the film consists of the following words: “Only in the infinite silence one can begin to hear. Only where there are no words one

can see". An exceptional film was made about people who in the purest form dedicated their whole lives to God.

There are few words uttered in the film. Those which can be heard sound even stronger. One of the monks, blind, says:

The closer a man gets to God, the happier he is. The faster he rushes to meet Him [...] The past and the present are human matters. In God there is no past, but only present. And when God sees us He can see the whole life of ours and because He is infinitely good He perpetually strives for our good [...] It's a pity that the world has completely lost the sense of God. It's a pity as people cannot find the reason to live. Once people stop thinking about God they lose the reason to live in this world.

The question often asked by present theologians, and also in Poland is: how to awake in a man the awareness of the need for God, the sensitivity to His presence. Questioning Christianity, or even its rejection is far worse than paganism since paganism desires something more, it opens itself for higher values. Apostasy does not reach for the ideals of Christianity. It does not want them. Churches where until recently God has been worshipped are now being sold.

In the centres of big, old European cities there have always been cathedrals. Their soaring towers showed the people living around their final destiny. The hearts of contemporary cities are depopulated and life moves to the outskirts. Shopping malls are becoming the cathedrals of the contemporary world and shopping itself is treated as one of the best kinds of entertainment. The desire to possess more and more material goods is constantly being fuelled into a man and the spiritual life – pushed aside.

A Canadian singer Shania Twain sings in her hit song "Ka-Ching!":

Our religion is to go and blow it [money] all
So it's shoppin' every Sunday at the mall.

The Architects of the European integration concentrate their efforts solely on the political and economic aspects, passing over the spiritual one. Yet, it is the spiritual aspect that is needed by our societies immersed in the atmosphere defined by the sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky as "the epoch of emptiness" (*l'ère du vide*). It seems that the Christians of the Union gave up the concern with their spirits in favour of the integrating Europe, as if they were convinced that "life without an ideal, without the transcendental sense is possible"⁴.

This can be clearly seen on the European currency, too. Both the coins and the notes have no reference to any religious content. On the reverses

⁴ G. Lipovetsky, *L'ère du vide. Essais sur l'individualisme contemporaine*, Paris 1983, p. 57.

of the coins no country refers to Christian symbolism. Only Spain is an exception. Here we have the tradition of the pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostella. However, it can be questioned whether religious values are of importance here or rather the popular, especially in the Middle Ages, phenomenon of wandering the western countries to St. James. Malta has had the euro since January with the Maltese cross on the reverse. Is this the religious premise? Probably not. That’s the emblem of Malta.

Jacques Prévert (1900–1977), an anarchist French poet, famous for his lyrics of the songs sang by Juliette Greco and Yves Montand and also for screenplays, while reading the *Lord’s Prayer* without any respect for the holiness wrote: “Our Father, who art in heaven, stay where you are!”. He was the author of an adaptation, full of sarcasm, of a well known scene from the Genesis: “And God said to Adam and Eve to their surprise: “Please, keep doing this, do not let my presence disturb you. Behave as if I did not exist!”

Jacques Prévert in his provocative speeches presented the reality which present religion is heading towards, the reality touching the so-called believers as well. There is no fight with God; He is not removed either from history or private life any longer. In general, militant atheism does not exist any more. Yet, God is simply ignored; He is left behind the door of a house and private life.

“Behave as if I did not exist”. So, God should not disturb us, with His commandments. He should not interfere with our problems and affairs. We should be free from his presence, He should withdraw to His heaven, full of golden glitter. This is not the time of God’s death, but His passivity, or even His absence. In some respects, this condition is far more dangerous as it does not cause any concern, does not force us to take a stand, and does not require any argumentation from us. This is a disease of indifference to all values, starting with God, which leaves a man with an illusory freedom of doing what he wants and likes, without any embarrassment or remorse. As a result, there is only dullness and a condition of moral chaos. To give sense to our lives, to fill in the emptiness where there is no God, a man seeks advice from psychologists, psychiatrists or even fortune tellers. These days in France services like these and places where various fortune tellers meet their clients are mushrooming.

First steps must be taken on the way to the return to God and to the real existence with its ethical commitment. Alexander the Macedonian said to Diogenes living in a tub: “I would like to do something for you” and the philosopher answered: “You stand in front of me and you’re hiding the sun, so don’t take away from me the thing that you can not give

me". The foregoing can be referred to a contemporary man who can be told: "Something is hiding you the sun, God, move it away".

The pilgrimages made by the Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI to Poland and other countries show how great the power of religion has been. Huge, sometimes even two million crowds of people of good will livened up with love go in peace and quiet to experience the great religious event. Police officers are needed only to show the way. When there is no love and emotions are stirred up, everything looks different. Overexcited and angry crowds of hundreds of fans, or rather hooligans, rampage and even police forces cannot stop it. Two million versus a few hundred – this is the power of the Gospel.

RAYS OF HOPE

The first sentence in *The Metaphysics* by Aristotle is unforgettable:

[...] all men by nature desire to know and pursue the light.

We are at HOPE University. It is worth looking for the rays of hope, the earthly hope and the gospel which the Holy Book talks about.

The earthly hope consists in waiting. The kind of belief hidden in our hearts that our desire will be fulfilled. Hope always means something good for us, joyful and something which makes us happy.

A student waits for a degree, a mother for the birth of her child, a patient to be operated on, convinced that the operation will be successful; we wait for a plane, a bus certain that it will take us to our destination.

These are only selected moments of waiting of which our lives consist. A sequence of events: joyful and sad, expected and unexpected, but always moving to the bottom of our hearts.

The earthly hope is waiting for the fulfilment of the desires of our own hearts. The greater the desire is and its value, sometimes even the smaller the chance for its fulfilment, the greater the hope is. Thus, hope is connected with what is going to happen, it is connected with the future. This is why it contains something of anxiety. Joy comes only after the fulfilment.

Apart from earthly hope, there is also Christian hope. It gives the promises of eternal life, and of salvation. Each of us is squeezed from two sides. On one side there is the life we have lived so far and we cannot change. It's impossible to go back to the years which have passed in order to make a change or blot something out. Often, the past life can be a bur-

den. On the other side there is the great and unknown future approaching us. When we are young and strong, we are not afraid of the future. We find it as open as nature. Yet, a small disability, or a serious illness, or aging is enough for us to become terrified of the future, even more than of the past, since the future, sooner or later, will close in front of us.

Life is like a jar of instant coffee. When you open a new jar, you take out heaped teaspoons of coffee as you can still see a full jar of coffee and you notice that every time you take some, you use only a little. However, when you approach the bottom of the jar, suddenly you realize that actually there is not much left, so you measure the portions carefully and economically. Finally, you try to get out the last grain. Well, we treat life in a similar way. The young believe they will live for ever. Then, when getting older, somewhere in the middle of the jar of coffee, they stop treating the time with such negligence because they begin to realize that it will not last for ever. Various questions appear: “What will I accomplish? What will I leave for this world?”. This shows maturity.

The present is squeezed between the past and the future. It can be very difficult, smashed by the past, by the spectre of a closing or hopeless future, or wonderful thanks for Christian hope. When I am ashamed of my past, I find it unsuccessful, and I cannot see the future. But as a believer, I can raise my hands and my heart to God, to heaven and I know that heaven is always open for me. Christian hope is a complete trust in God; it is the moment of offering Him both our past and future.

Those who have hope have peace and do not fear. They are not afraid of the mistakes they have made and of tomorrow. They know that our loving God waits for a single word uttered with love: “Father”, “Our Father”. Those who have the Christian hope have the joy which cannot be put out by anything, which comes from God. Christian hope is the present moment raised to God; it is raising of hands in a prayer. What can we do not to let our lives be empty and grey?

Let’s paint the world with the colours of hope

It is us who give the colours to the world or immerse the reality of the world and life in black tar. Many times our dissatisfaction has eclipsed the dawn, our bitterness has filled the spring with sadness, our inner cold has frozen the summer out; hatred has made the snow pink and laziness cut the dialog with family and friends. “The world is always like this; we give it the colours of distress and misery [...]. The world takes our colours” – Cees Nooteboom, one of the greatest living Dutch writers says.

Paraphrasing the gospel saying, Rabelais (about 1494–1553) in his famous book *Gargantua and Pantagruel* wrote: “Hours were created for a man and not a man for hours”.

Thus, we should master the time and fill it with the right deeds, brighten it up and make it fruitful like the soil we cultivate to make it flourish. Let’s paint the world with the colours of hope and let’s not plunge it in the grey of resignation.

If glasses are dark, the whole horizon seems to be dark as well. Sometimes the world seems to be quite ugly and bad because our sight is not able to perceive its colours and diversity. Thus, it is worth perceiving the Invisible.

To perceive the Invisible

There is this famous change introduced by the theologian Karl Barth to the Cartesian statement *Cogito, ergo sum* (I think therefore I am) and transforming into *Cogitor, ergo sum* (I am thought of [by God] therefore I am). At the roots of our existence, our life and activity, there is a choice and an Act of God, the Word which appointed us.

God is a power which makes us rise above egoism and we help our neighbours. It is the power which inspires our neighbours to rise above egoism as well and to help us. God lifts us up, far above ourselves like the sun which makes the trees and plants grow. God calls us to become something more than we were at the starting point. “The basic task of a Christian in this earthly life is to heal the eyes of our hearts, in order to see God” – saint Augustine of Hippo taught in one of his sermons⁵.

We owe our existence to the Creator, but whom we become depends on the choices we make within our freedom; on the care we take of our diligence. The talent once given cannot be wasted.

Referring to the Bible

Saint Augustine of Hippo in his XII book of *The Confessions* while making reflections on the word of God notices:

Wondrous depth of Thy words! Whose surface, behold! Is before us, inviting little ones; yet are they a wondrous depth. Oh my God, a wondrous depth! It is awful to look therein; an awfulness of honour, and a trembling of love.

⁵ *Sermo* 88; PL 38, 542: “Tota igitur opera nostra, fratres, in hac vita est, sanare oculum cordis, unde videatur Deus”.

In 1750 a great composer, Johann Sebastian Bach died at the age of 65, in Leipzig, where he lived and worked his whole life. He was “playing” his faith during his life. In the headings of his manuscripts he used to write “J.J.”— Jesu Juva, “Jesus, help me” and he signed his compositions “S.D.G.” Soli Deo Gloria convinced that only God deserves glory. What is interesting, is that his inventory was composed of books only in the fields of theology and spirituality.

He left the whole ocean of compositions entirely based on the Bible. A meticulous reference to the fragments of the Bible can also be found in the compositions for which texts were created by appointed libretto writers (which happened with his two hundred cantatas).

The most famous work composed by the master from Leipzig is the *St. Matthew Passion*. Unfortunately, it is often listened to by an audience which does not know German and also might not be familiar with Matthew’s story about the suffering, death and burial of Jesus (Mt 26, 1–75; 27, 1–66). The Passion was performed on Good Friday during religious ceremonies. This was why the text of the Gospel was alternated between the choirs which were to help in meditation and encourage full participation and conversion of the heart. Those who love great music could meditate on the suffering of Christ, by following the work of Bach and reading the translation of the German text.

To live with the truth

A famous Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel, writes: “Every king has a seal which, when attached to a document, is a guarantee of authenticity. The seal contains a symbol signifying the power and majesty of the king. What symbol is engraved on the seal of the King of kings? “The seal of God is truth” and truth is our only test. *A flatterer cannot come before Him (Job 13:16)*”.

The truth of impersonating the life of a given man appeals to contemporary man the most. His example and his certification can speak louder than the words of the most zealous encouragement. So, every Christian should become a “living piece of the Gospel” – as Polish writer Jan Parandowski says.

To understand the other

Is there still anybody ready to listen to and accept the words of another person? Today, everybody is in a hurry. Yet, the feeling of being listened

to or even understood is a valuable gift which can help so many people get out of emptiness and depression. If you meet a man with a sincere attitude towards you, you can show your hidden scars and the injuries of which you are ashamed. The other man does not have to find immediate solutions (which is often impossible), but what's important, he can listen to you, share your pain and feel sorry for you. Thus, it is so important for us to give a part of our time to friendship, closeness, and meetings – without furtively looking at our watches.

To be happy by making good

The greatest goods were given to us for free: the gift of life, loving parents, a lot of talents and skills. The man, who realizes it, expresses the words of admiration, similar to those said by a great French convert André Frossard. From a professed atheist, in the moment of grace, he came to the light of faith. In the last sentence of his autobiography *Dieu existe, je l'ai rencontré* (God exists I have met Him) he says:

O Divine Love, eternity will be too short to speak of you⁶.

Does life without any borders – with the possibility to do everything, to get everywhere, to order everybody – guarantee happiness? This very question is analyzed by Goethe in *Faust* – the story about a man who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for a single moment on the earth so wonderful for him to say: “Abide, you are so fair!”. The main character of Goethe's drama, Dr. Faust, wants to experience everything and to live without any borders or limitations. He wants to read all books, to speak all languages, to try all pleasures. He wants to be as God and to overcome the limitations of the human condition. The devil gives him everything – wealth, power, the possibility to travel everywhere, the love of every woman he wants. Faust takes it all, but he is still unhappy. At the end of his life he works on building a dam in order to tear the land away from the sea and give it to people so that they could live there and cultivate the soil. Like God the Creator, he separates the water from the land; he plants orchards and settles people there. It is only now, for the first time in his life, that he can say: “Abide, you are so fair!”.

The happiest people are those who simply try to be good, obliging and trustworthy and happiness somehow sneaks into their lives, when they are busy with something else. A man cannot find happiness by chasing it.

⁶ A. Frossard, *Dieu existe, je l'ai rencontré*, Paris 1991, p. 156.

Happiness is a by-product and not the main goal. It is like a butterfly – the more we try to chase it, the farther it flies and hides from us. Once we stop chasing it, we put the net aside and we are busy with doing something else, it stealthily comes to us and sits on our shoulder.

* * *

The well known scholastic rule says: *bonum est diffusivum sui*. Goodness by its nature, presents, spreads out, spills, disseminates. We received great divine goods, from His unlimited and generous love: the gift of life, the gift of Christian vocation, the gift of salvation and many others. One cannot stop the dynamism of development. One cannot be a seed for ever, but must grow to give out an ear. One cannot stay in between a seed and a flower. When presented we want to present. Saint Augustine has been reminding us for centuries: “Love and do what you want”⁷.

Let’s be a seed of love and a bud of good. Yet, the Christian culture means not only cathedrals and Bach’s cantatas, mystic poetry, icons, or sacred paintings. There is also the way of behaviour inspired by Christianity; the atmosphere of love in a family; the smile of a mother; the handshake of a father; the family bond; disinterested help – these are the quiet and hidden treasures of the Christian culture, which are surely worth the dignity of cathedrals, the beauty of canvases of Fra Angelico, or cantatas by Johann Sebastian Bach.

„POMALOWAĆ ŚWIAT KOLORAMI NADZIEI”
Refleksje teologiczne

Streszczenie

Żyjemy w świecie fantastycznych odkryć naukowych. Człowiek podejmuje podróże kosmiczne i zgłębia tajniki wszechświata. Zna ludzki genom. Jednakże najdoskonalsze mikroskopy i teleskopy odczytujące tajemnice świata nie odkryją w nim informacji po co żyjemy, dlaczego płaczymy, po co umieramy, jaki jest sens naszego życia. Dzisiaj te pytania są spychane często na obrzeża naszego życia i naszej świadomości. W świecie wykreowanym przez media bardzo rzadko pojawia się odniesienie do Boga. Paradoksalnie nasz wzrok stał się słabszy i krótszy, a nasz horyzont duchowy ograniczył się często jedynie do tego, co widzialne i namacalne. Człowiek współczesny niejednokrotnie nie potrafi wybiegać poza nakreślony mu horyzont, nie potrafi przenikać kolorowej warstwy obrazów i materii. A podstawowe pytania

⁷ S. Augustinus, *In Iohan.* 7, 8.

pozostają bez odpowiedzi... Tymczasem to, co jest naprawdę ważne, jest niewidoczne. Trzeba zatem dostrzec Niewidzialnego, sięgnąć do Biblii, żyć prawdą, zrozumieć drugich, mieć radość z czynienia dobra. Kultura chrześcijańska to nie tylko katedry i kantaty Jana Sebastiana Bacha, poezja mistyczna, ikony czy malarstwo sakralne. Istnieje także inspirowany chrześcijaństwem sposób bycia, atmosfera miłości w rodzinie, uśmiech matki, uścisk ojca, rodzinna więź, bezinteresowna pomoc – to ciche i ukryte skarby kultury chrześcijańskiej, z pewnością warte dostojności katedr, piękna płócien Fra Angelico, kantat Jana Sebastiana Bacha.

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