THE ACTIVITY OF THE UNIVERSITY IN RELATION TO PASTORAL CARE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract: Since their beginnings, universities have been places where science has been developed and a Christian form of spirituality has been nurtured. Pastoral care for university students is still part of what universities around the world offer today. This article outlines the basic characteristics of pastoral care for university students in Slovakia and in English-speaking countries. The comparison shows that there is a significantly different understanding of this service. The research problem – how participants assessed the educational activity of the university pastoral centre (UPC) compared to the university where they studied – was investigated using a qualitative research method, the in-depth interview, which is the main research method of phenomenological analysis. The research findings suggest that the participants perceived the educational activity of the university pastoral centre and the university as directly contradictory in some areas, in others as neutral. In addition, they suggested they had an expectation of integrating the expert knowledge acquired at the university with their spiritual beliefs. The research also includes facts which are not obvious at first glance and were found during the in-depth examination of the research problem, especially in the form of critical comments that students made, to a greater extent about the work of the university pastoral centre and to a lesser extent about the university where they studied.

Keywords: University. University student. Pastoral care.

1 Introduction

Pastoral care for university students is as old as universities themselves. From the beginning, these institutions included theological faculties, and the spiritual service for teaching staff and students was part of the basis of their mission. Various modifications of this pastoral care arose over the centuries depending on the traditions of each country.

The educational possibilities of the Catholic Church were considerably limited before the 1989 revolution in the former Czechoslovakia, as in other Eastern Bloc countries, due to communist ideology to varying degrees. In the developed Western states, the influence of religion in public life was weakened by the process of secularization. Sociologists were convinced that this process would gradually spread to other parts of the world after the most advanced countries (Nešpor, 2004). In fact, this illusion was dispelled in the last third of the twentieth century, as religion found its way back into the public sphere, and sociologists changed their theses and began talking about re-Christianisation, re-Judaization and re-Islamification from the grass roots (Kepel, 1996).

With the fall of the communist regime in November 1989, new opportunities for pastoral work opened up for the Catholic Church. Pastoral care for university students is an important element of the Church's regular work. Its specific outcome was the establishment of university pastoral centres.

2 Pastoral care for university students

Pastoral care for university students abroad can be of a dual nature. In the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, it could only fully develop after the fall of the individual communist regimes. However, even before the fall of the Iron Curtain, it was not uniform and the conditions in the individual countries differed significantly. While there was no official pastoral care for university students in the former Czechoslovakia, in Poland the church was able to maintain some autonomy, which was also reflected in pastoral activities for university students. In Western countries, rising secularism was a significant constraint. In both cases, individual countries sought their own ways of addressing this area of special pastoral care.

The space constraints of this article do not enable us to offer a detailed analysis of several pastoral models, so we focus on just two. The Slovak model to a certain extent will also reflect some of the other countries of the former Eastern Bloc, most particularly the Czech Republic, and to a lesser extent Poland. The antithesis of this model will be represented by the English-speaking countries, where pastoral care has not only been maintained in the universities but is worked on intensively. The difference is that in many cases it is quite different from the Slovak perception of pastoral service in the university environment.

2.1 The establishment of university pastoral centres in Slovakia

The political changes after the 1989 revolution offered the Catholic Church new opportunities for pastoral activity in Slovakia. Part of its energy was focused on pastoral care for university students. The fundamental motive of the Church's return to the university environment was the essence of the university itself, which is focused on highly qualified teaching of all sciences (Kolář, 2012). The Church's ambition should therefore be a narrowly specialized and highly qualified pastoral service aimed specifically at university students studying in conditions that predestine them to become leading intellectual and spiritual members of society (Petruš, 2010).

Pastoral care for university students is a common practice worldwide. After 1989 within the Catholic Church in Slovakia, a variation of pastoral care was created which was unseen elsewhere. In addition to spiritual service, great emphasis is placed on the free time activities of university students, especially cultural, sporting and charity activities.

The establishment of university pastoral centres was legally based on the *Treaty between the Slovak Republic and the Holy See on Catholic Education and Training* (Zmluva, 2004). Currently, services are offered to undergraduate students by 13 university pastoral centres set up by the Catholic Church and one by the evangelical church.

2.2 English-speaking countries

The English adjective *pastoral* is commonly used in two ways. To indicate land or farms used for or related to sheep or cattle farming. The second meaning is related to spiritual guidance. Though these two meanings apparently have nothing to do with each other, but they are actually integrally related. In the books of the New Testament, we find a richly represented image of Christ as a good shepherd (Hastings, Mason, and Pyper, 2000) who cares for those who have accepted him with faith and seeks to create the best possible lives for them and protect them from perilous danger.

It is natural, therefore, that pastoral care in the university environment originally referred to the role of a shepherd who cared for his flock and it was almost exclusively associated with the church and concerned with spiritual guidance. At present, this term has a much broader meaning. Although there is no generally accepted definition of pastoral care in the UK, the term is generally used to refer to the responsibility of the teacher for the general well-being of their students (Calvert, 2009). It refers to the daily work of the teacher and is understood as the type of influence on the student's personality and environment which is intended to support the development of their intellectual and social skills and contribute to their emotional stability. In principle, it is an effort to determine all the variables of the educational process so as to give every student the best chance of success (Crane, 1990).

Thus, pastoral care is understood in considerably wider terms than in Slovakia and is subsumed into the broader issue of caring

for students. It is not so much about developing the student's spirituality, but rather about solving common student problems, such as study, personal, relationship and psychological problems. This approach is based on the fact that academic and pastoral duties cannot easily be separated because academic problems almost always have a non-academic cause (Hughes et al, 2018). In this context, universities are attempting to specify the responsibilities of employees for academic and pastoral care. However, this is not based on the notion that they need to be separated, but in order to clearly define the levels of responsibilities for employees and provide clarity for students as a result.

Universities are trying to tackle pastoral care professionally – through personal tutors and academic supervisors. The problem is the difficulty of strictly separating academic and pastoral responsibilities. These specialists are uncertain about where the boundaries of their roles lie, and what their remits are. A further problem is the lack of a shared view between universities on what is part of academic care and what is part of pastoral care. Therefore, the role of a personal tutor in one school is understood in terms of academic support, and in others as more pastoral support. Another factor preventing a clearer perception of the pastoral service is the fact that students bring personal problems not only to their personal tutors, but to any member of the university staff whom they trust. However, there is a general consensus that cases that fall within the professional competence of other professionals, such as psychologists, must be referred to them.

Although this is not the norm in the definition of pastoral care in English-speaking universities, in some cases, in addition to emotional and psychological, the definition of pastoral service also mentions promoting the spiritual welfare of students (Equality, 2013). But that does not mean that it directly relates to spiritual ministry of the priests from individual church denominations for the benefit of the students.

The Australian and New Zealand approach to defining pastoral care takes a similar approach to that in the United Kingdom, with the difference that it explicitly states the original definition of this service based on the principle of Christian philosophy, which is focused on personal development and, in particular, on the universal and moral well-being of students (Lang, 1983). At the present time, it seeks above all to promote values relating to mutual respect, responsibility and services within the community (Pastoral care, 1994). Although the referenced Christian basis has been eroded from this service, the individual areas of activity include support for the student's moral and spiritual development, as well as the preventive function of pastoral ministry (Cross, Lester and Barnes, 2008).

In the materials of Catholic universities, Jesus Christ is directly mentioned as the image and form of God present in the human community. Jesus' values and teachings show all people the way, the truth and life, and it is from that the values are derived that this kind of pastoral service seeks to promote – love, respect, compassion, tolerance, forgiveness, repentance, reconciliation and justice (Pastoral Care Policy, 2016). The question of what means of promotion that entails is not answered in these documents.

Some universities offer, if necessary and in the interest of students, the direct service of a priest of a particular Christian denomination, to whom the students can turn if necessary. In the United States of America, especially in Catholic universities, there are Catholic university centres (for examples the *Catholic student center at Washington University* has, in addition to its Catholic priest and deacon, 19 other team members who look after the needs of the students) (Stohr, 1996), with a similar focus to that of university pastoral centres in Slovakia.

3 Methodology

The principle of phenomenological analysis, which is part of qualitative methodology, was used in this research. The essence of phenomenological analysis lies in the fact that the researcher tries to enter the inner world of the individual in order to understand the meanings the person attributes to the phenomenon under investigation (Miles and Huberman, 1994). They try to reveal the way a selected group experiences the world, representing the feelings, thoughts and self-knowledge of the subjects (Morgan and Smircich, 1980). The main aim of phenomenological research is to analyse and describe the actual experience of the individual (group) with the specific phenomenon (Grbich, 2009). It seeks to understand the hidden meanings and essence of the experience along with the importance attributed by the participants themselves (Gavora, 2009).

In our research we used a semi-structured in-depth interview. The basic research question was: How did the participants assess the educational activity of the university pastoral centre compared to that of the university where they studied? The basic research question is very broad and therefore, as it is common in qualitative design, we have divided it into smaller units and specified it in separate research questions (Bryman, 2006).

We transcribed and encoded the recorded conversations using open coding (Ezzy, 2002). The individual codes were subsequently categorized (Strauss and Corbinová, 1999). The research report processes those categories that relate to the research topic.

3.1 Participants in analytical interviews

The recommendations in the literature regarding the number of participants in a phenomenological study are not uniform. Various authors mention numbers ranging from 7 to 15 people (Creswell, 1994). More important than the number of participants in the sample is that the meaning categories be saturated (Brikci and Green, 2007). The research sample in our research consisted of 14 participants – 5 male students and 9 female students. We chose this ratio of men and women deliberately because it corresponds to the proportion of male and female students attending the UPC. We used a homogeneous sample when selecting participants (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005) – the focus of our research was to study participants who had a shared experience, namely attending a university pastoral centre.

3.2 Data collection, processing and analysis

We used a qualitative interview method – an in-depth semi-structured interview – to gather research data. This interpersonal method is based on personal contact, which is aimed at putting the researcher into the shoes of the participant (Mack et al, 2005).

Some of the interviews took place at the participants' private accommodation and some of them took place at the faculty where they studied or in the university pastoral centre. We tried to meet the requirements of the participants. The opening part of the interview sought to assure them that their identity would remain anonymous. At the end of the opening part of the meeting, we asked their express permission to record the interview. After it was granted, we began recording the interview.

Quotes from interviews used in the work are given in italics. In parentheses without italics is information that could lead to the identification of the participants or other people who have some relation to the research. The quotations are not linguistically or stylistically edited. They are presented as we recorded them, including with grammatical errors. Since we decided not even to give fictitious names to the participants, after each quote there is a code that contains information about whether it is a male student M or a female student W. Next follows the serial number of the interview and the number of the page from which the quote is taken. For example, (2M4) is a quotation from the interview with the male student who has serial number 2, taken from page 4.

4 Comparison of the activity of the university pastoral centre and the university

We live in a pluralistic society and the diversity of opinions is a reality that we cannot deny. This also applies to the higher education environment in which the flow of thoughts and the creative emerging atmosphere should be unhindered. We do not assume that there is anything like a unified attitude in this environment putting religious faith as the highest-ranking value. However, what we might expect is some acceptance and respect that among the students are those who have religious beliefs and want to develop them during university. In this subchapter we try to find the answer to the question of whether it is perceived like that by the participants.

The participants stated the despite the educators being practicing believers, they did not explicitly reveal their religious beliefs to the students, so the participants implicitly interpreted this as meaning they are operating in an atheistic environment. *I think it was two different worlds* (11M5). As if the world of science and specialized vocational training was absolutely separated from the world of religious faith. Students identified people of a similar mindset among the university educators in different ways. For example, based on whether they accepted an invitation to UPC events. *I registered the invited professors, so I was able to see who was religiously oriented and had nothing against communicating in that way too. So, then, one discovered who was a believer without trying to find out* (4M5).

An important role in this issue was played by the subject which they student studied at university. *I think that the UPC did not want intentionally to act against the faculty and against the teaching. It went its own way, and a person could choose which way to go. Whether it would be the teaching style of the faculty, which had a certain post-communist character, because I felt there was, in a way, a materialistic approach to the perception of the person, that is, in my field, in psychology* (8W7). The study of this discipline also brings knowledge of facts that are intertwined or directly related to the content of religious beliefs. It was striking to our participants that in the common material for psychology and theology it was lectured that the expert opinion of psychology excluded the attitude of theology. According to the participants, there was a lack of effort to integrate or at least some admission of the integration of both positions. *For example, the soul is only a chemical transmission or personality part of a chemical transmission. That was presented, about which I was not internally convinced. The fact that I am also convinced of something different was something that the UPC helped me to integrate. But I don't think that it wanted to go against our faculty. Rather, the reverse. The faculty was not convinced that spiritual life helps a person progress so much. But that's only some people, not everyone* (9W7). The participant appreciated the work of the university pastoral centre, which she understood as an opportunity to integrate professional and theological aspects into a whole that would be beneficial for her personal growth.

On the other hand, the UPC's activities in this area were too strict for other participants, without the possibility to discuss the problem. One student felt as if they were being guided to the only "correct" opinion, which would be an attitude consistent with the church's position. *In school, it was more like a discussion. It ended in a neutral way, but it sparked a discussion, with this opinion and that opinion when we were doing, for example, family law. And in UPC it always led towards the believers' conclusions as to how to look at this world* (5W10). We can discuss whether this fact should be evaluated positively or negatively. On the one hand, it is logical that UPC presents and defends the Church's position. On the other hand, faith is the free response of a person to the offer of faith, so the person to whom it is offered ought necessarily to feel freedom in terms of whether they choose it or not.

The participants perceived the activities of the university and the university pastoral centre to be neutral or contradictory. They did not agree whether the UPC's position on the offer of faith

sufficiently respected human freedom. *It is important to know what, how, in what way I should communicate or act, what a Christian should know in order to properly defend their views. On the other hand, sometimes I felt at UPC that it was so strict, that it has to be that way and that's it. Without my having my own opinion, or my having the time to form my own opinion. So, I liked at school that it was so open, not every opinion was rejected* (6W10). This attitude of UPC partly reflects the fact that in the pastoral practice of the Catholic Church it appears quite often. It is a dogmatic promotion of faith as a necessity, without a comprehensive justification, without solid theological and anthropological argumentation, discussion and sufficient respect for the individual's personal freedom. The presence of this attitude in the activities of the UPC means that the special pastoral care in this regard is not sufficiently "special" because to communicate and defend faith in the rarefied intellectual environment of a university requires a different approach than in the parish, where the priest must work with the entire age and intellectual spectrum of believers. We do not mean that UPC should offer more doubt about belief or more scepticism, but it certainly should place more emphasis on discussion, deeper argumentation and respect personal freedom more. Of course, this should go hand in hand with a deep spiritual life. The participant must feel that the decision for faith is their free and joyful decision, not a forced response created by the requirements of the Church as an institution.

4.1 Criticism of the community levelled at the University Pastoral Centre

The aim of the research was not to find out the critical reservations of students against UPC's activities, but during the interviews this topic constantly arose naturally, so we decided to include this part in the final report.

The first part of the participants' reservations concerned the closed nature of the community at the UPC. *The people at UPC like to close themselves off from others. Outwardly, everything looked open, but in fact I often encountered closed relationships and groups, so I didn't feel at home at UPC* (3M1). This criticism has two possible origins. Either it is caused by a situation where a new student comes into the community and needs some time to adapt to the community. Creating relationships requires an openness on both sides that cannot be programmed or enforced. The second reason is the non-acceptance of various proposals, when a member of the community put forward proposals but the others do not accept their proposals. There was another objection about the closed nature, but in different sense. *There were enough activities for people who were at the centre of things. However, the people there were the same people who came to everything, so the community was a bit closed* (13M1). Every type of activity in the university pastoral centre has its fans. For example, students who organized literary evenings or exhibitions have mostly not visited other activities.

For the more spiritually minded students with rich experience from spiritual life, some members of the prayer community were too superficial. *Sometimes it was just so superficial. Even though we had those bible meetings where I had the opportunity to hear some opinions, they were strange. But it was good that it was possible to point out that they were bad* (14W10). And of course we cannot avoid the various conflicts, misunderstandings and mutual animosity that can affect any community. The relationships were not quite right. Of course, not everyone gets on with everyone, but I have more neutral impressions from it (5W10).

Some of the participants' critical comments concerned the programme offered by the pastoral centre. *I would have liked there to be wider range of regular meetings, which would be the best place to build personal relationships* (4M1). This proposal lacked a more specific vision in the participant's statement. Further proposals were not solely dependent on the decision of UPC management. According to the participants, the UPC priests could teach at the university where the UPC was

operating. *I would add lectures in the field of marital maturity, the functioning of the family, for which students could enrol as an optional subject and it would be taught by someone from the UPC* (2M1).

Several church administrators and chaplains have come and gone at the university pastoral centre. There is also a change in the style of UPC pastoral care. The following statement from a participant represents those who took a critical view of the more focused orientation of the new UPC management towards the spiritual activities. *I had the feeling that it became more spiritually focused. And that's not what suits the university students, it suits a certain group of people. But that group of people can't keep the UPC together because it will become a closed community that no one else will want to enter. And when it is more open and not about spiritual matters, other people will come there. My classmate* (classmate's name) *wouldn't be there if you were too spiritual and I wouldn't either. And if it had been from the beginning how it was with the new manager, I wouldn't have gone there. That system doesn't suit me and never suited me* (4M2). The participant's statement suggests a constructive discussion on how the church should communicate with individual groups of believers. A different pastoral style is required by people whose background is a traditional family of believers. Another style is required by those who are believers, but either their spirituality is more fragile, or in their faith they emphasise practical deeds over spiritual life and pastoral practice.

In spite of the stated reservations about the university pastoral centre, the participants attended it either through their entire university studies or for a substantial part of it, which suggests that it was sufficiently attractive for them to spend their own time not only as consumers but also as active members. So, the positives outweighed the negatives.

5 Conclusion

Based on the conclusions of the research we conclude that the activities of the university and the university pastoral centre were like two different worlds for the participants. On the one hand, the world of empirical knowledge and scientific research, and on the other, as if its antithesis or even its irreconcilable adversary, stood the world of spirituality. It made it harder for the participants that they expected the possibility of integrating these two worlds. Above all, they blamed the university for the fact that it was precisely in the topics that offered the possibility of integrating the two areas that there was a considerable lack of interest in trying to do so, and also that they implicitly indicated the insignificance of spiritual life. They criticised the university pastoral centre for its dogmatic recitation of certain principles that lacked theological and anthropological argumentation, open discussion, and respect for the participant's personal freedom. This fact suggests that the UPC's activities should be more respectful of all specificities of university students as an important social group (in both psychological and sociological terms).

The above research conclusions raise a question that this research does not answer, which is why the students perceived the activities of the university and the university pastoral centre as contradictory. Only as a comment we can state that perhaps a certain share of responsibility for this situation may be the persistent conflict of attitudes and opinions on the liberal and conservative spectrum in all areas of society. Finally, it's not a new phenomenon, but a continuation of a process that has a rich history. One more argument worth mentioning, is the certain form of antagonism that was systematically developed in the Slovak environment before 1989, and which circumstances suggest that it still persists. This is the massively enforced belief of the totalitarian regime that religious belief is an experience that hinders and enslaves a person.

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