

## THE NEW STUDY PROGRAM COUNSELING AS A RESPONSE TO THE NEEDS OF THE TIMES

<sup>a</sup>MÁRIA ŠMIDOVÁ, <sup>b</sup>KATARÍNA SLEZÁKOVÁ

<sup>a,b</sup> *Trnava University in Trnava, Faculty of Theology, Kostolná 1, P.O. BOX 173, 814 99 Bratislava, Slovakia*  
 email: <sup>a</sup>maria.smidova@truni.sk <sup>b</sup>katarina.slezakova@truni.sk

**Abstract:** In the article, we aim to present the process of forming a new study program and subsequently, the process of establishing a new profession in Slovakia. We are talking about a new profession of Counseling, which currently has an important place in supporting people in various stressful situations. Thanks to foreign partners, the Faculty of Theology of the University of Trnava works intensively on rapid growth of the credibility of counseling as a profession. Efficiency of the counseling as a profession has been proved by recent multifactorial empirical research. Result of this research, as well as other sub-researches, was approval of a new professional oriented study program with focus on counseling establishing in Slovak environment.

**Keywords:** counseling, study program, counseling establishing

### 1 Introduction to the issues of counseling

#### 1.1 Definition of counseling

Counseling, also called professional mentoring in Slovakia, is one of the methods of social work that presents a help for clients coping with difficult life situations. This is a form of a client support in which a mentor guides a client to activate his/her own inner resources, necessary to solve the problem. Let us call it a help to self-help. The priority of the mentoring process is building such a professional helping relationship that is non-directive and based on trust, esteem and respect. It is built by using acceptance, empathy, congruence and effective communication. So it is about making a conversation in which the guided person is able to listen carefully. The conversation should have a support character, aimed at a searching and opening possibilities that the person had not identified or used until then. So the goal is not to advise, but to discover and strengthen. It is important to lead a guided person to searching for inner strength in oneself, to the ability to discover a possibility for solving the given problem and motivations for its implementation. The concept of counseling is based on relationship equality between social worker and client, accompanying and accompanied.

Another pillar is the acceptance of the accompanied client, who with a help of the mentoring person accepts responsibility for his/her actions and personal development so that he/she knows how to make responsible decisions and live an independent life. The term of counseling appeared in the literature as a description of activities aimed at social or psychological problems in 1909 used by Frank Parsons. Its development significantly more appeared in the United States of America at the end of the 40's, while its development was primarily accelerated by two factors: the need to form a strategic and effective help for soldiers returning from war and the birth of humanistic psychology, which presents a new vision of man in which the quality of relationships, free choice, creative and planning stimulus of the individual gain importance. These factors gave rise to the creation of a new profession of counsellor, which expanded from the beginning of 50's, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries. Helping relationship or "counseling" responds to the needs of a social character such as existential questions, loss of supporting points, the constant changes of society and the inevitable requirement of sufficiently suitable and adaptive manners (Meier, T.S. - Davis, R.S, 1996).

#### 1.2 History and establishment of counseling abroad

Counseling as a specialized professional activity began to develop dominantly in the sphere of professional orientation. In this period, qualitative growth is conditional by creating an organized form of assistance. This help is not only aimed at youth and parents, but also in the field of economics or education (e.g. when choosing a profession, the study, schools). The onset of counseling was accompanied by the establishment

of counseling centers and counseling centers institutions focused on various types of specialized consulting and counseling services. In 1937, at Duke University in the USA, the first course of "pair counseling" took place and in 1943 the first counseling manual for social workers was published. The theoretical foundations for this form of intervention were created by Carl Ransom Rogers, an American psychologist and founder of the so-called non-directive psychotherapy, who in 1951 in the work "On client-oriented therapy" developed a new approach to counseling and therapy. The non-directive client-centered psychotherapy suggests an approach that "focuses on the person". He emphasized that individuals have, within themselves, a source of self understanding and self-directed behavior.

By the term "counseling" Rogers understood a relationship in which the client is assisted in his/her own difficulties without being denied the possibility of free choice and own responsibility. The central hypothesis of such an approach was based on a huge source self-understanding and basic attitudes of the individual. Another factor that influenced the development of counseling can be identified in the field of prevention from a model focused on the disease to a model centered on the health of the individual in which the concept of prevention took a key role.

During the 70's, counseling began to deal with adolescents and their families and consequently, an increasingly urgent need to intervene in school and social environment. The traditional socially branched network of multigenerational families was gradually reduced so that it created a space for a type of family that no longer created so many social relationships and often relied on social services in case of need for external help (Ivey E. A, 2015).

In Europe, counseling began to be used in the 70's in Great Britain as a service with a pedagogical focus and as a tool for supporting social services and volunteering. Subsequently, two important related associations were established: the British Association for Counseling (BAC) in 1977 (since 2000 known as the British Association for Counseling and Psychotherapy – BACP), and the European Association for Counseling (European Association for Counseling – EAC) in 1991. The European Counseling Association later defined educational standards and established criteria for the necessary range of education hours, education methods as well as the standards of ethical behavior of counselors. The European Escort Association published the following definition in 1995:

"Counselling is an interactive relationship that serves for solving clients' problems. These issues can be social, cultural or emotional and a counselor will approach to them holistically. The client can be a person or a family group or even an institution. The general goal of counseling is to help clients recognize opportunities for living more satisfied and valuable lives as individuals and as members of society." (*Definition of Counselling, 2016*) In the Eastern Europe countries, counseling is still less known and little used, thus leaving more space for other forms of help - psychological, psychiatric, social etc.

#### 2 Preparation for the establishment of counseling in Slovakia

The process of preparation and establishment of the new Counseling profession in Slovakia can be presented as a process of finding answers in the four basic perspectives which are acceptance of culture, methodological starting points, needs and conditions.

We present our run which represents a ten-year period of research, study, practical verification, preparation of the new study program until its opening in the academic year 2022/2023.

## 2.1 Results of research aimed at establishing counseling in selected helping professions

At the beginning of the creation of the new program, it was necessary to build a scientific and professional basis in Slovak environment that consisted of extensive research that became the basis for creating conditions for the promotion of Counseling as an official profession in the country. This research was carried out in the professional and erudite background of already existing scientific and professional areas, namely social work and pastoral theology.

The first perspective is the answer to the question: To whom?

We focused on the needs of the people living in our country and on what our people and our culture consider as important. It was necessary to respond to important cultural aspects and needs, resulting from the characteristics of people living in Slovakia. As important, in the field of culture, showed the three-year project "Effective Practice", which consisted of several meetings for which three groups of people were invited: teachers, students and specific groups of possible clients to counselling. In a safe environment, they talked, saw and got to know their situations, problems, ways of communication, thinking and decision making. In the conclusions of these meetings, there was carried out a qualitative research in the form of the "focus group", the results of which showed three basic cultural aspects, namely spirituality, identity and self-confidence (Šmidová et al., 2021).

The second perspective is the answer to the question Where?

It was about finding out what the social and personnel situation is like in Slovakia. When examining of these perspectives, the results of sociological research for the other period were taken into account for they realistically represented the social situation in Slovakia and indicated the areas that require a care (Šmidová et al., 2019). Also, personnel options to provide such assistance, were taken into account. At the conclusion of this research, four basic areas were identified: *family, palliative care, young people, spiritual area*. As personally closest showed the so far developed profession of a social worker with a specific orientation to professional accompaniment. Professional training of teachers for this type of the program was carried out continuously in cooperating institutions, namely Central Florida University (US), Maryland University (US), Università Lateranense, Istituto Camilianum (Italy) and ASPIC (Italy).

The third perspective is the answer to the question How?

We took a closer look on the steps that need to be taken when implementing counseling to the Slovak social system. This area of research was related to the consideration of social state policy, its priorities and needs, which are defined in various documents. One among them was the National Strategic Framework for Family Support and Demographic Development by the year 2030, which was developed in accordance with the principles of creating public strategies in a participatory manner with the involvement of relevant actors. For the purposes of initial expertise and processing of the initial analysis of priority areas, Family and Demographic Development department members of the government of the Slovak Republic (National Strategic framework for supporting the family and demographic development until 2030) also participated. In the field of implementation counseling in the social system, the Faculty of Theology of the University of Trnava has implemented several scientific projects. Among the most significant was the project APVV 15-0189 - Selected factors of pro-family strategy and the support of a stable family in a multicultural environment, which was granted by Ministry of Education of the SR. It was a long-term research on a pro-family national strategy. Its results were presented and it was accepted by the authorities of our social system. Another similar project is KEGA 006TTU-4/2021 - Creation of a module of distance education of pastoral counseling for selected helping professions – social work and pastoral theology.

The fourth perspective is the answer to the question Who?

In this area, it was necessary to choose a suitable methodology and a professional approach, to find suitable partners as professional guarantors and source of know-how. This perspective was clearly defined from the beginning of the process, resulting from long-term cooperation with foreign partners in the US, namely Scranton University in Scranton and Central Florida University in Orlando (Florida); in Italy collaboration with Università Lateranense in Rome and ASPIC in Verona.

Faculty of Theology of Trnava University in Trnava organized several international conferences and seminars with significant foreign participation in order to support the establishment of an official counseling profession in Slovakia. University of Scranton (USA) in 2014, international conference in cooperation with the Institute of Mental Health (Hungary) in 2016 and international conference in cooperation with the University of Central Florida (USA) in 2017 and 2021.

The chosen strategy is interesting from a global point of view because it covers the key perspectives for the formation of a new professions: culture, social situation, methodology and implementation of counseling in the social system. The result of the mentioned activities was the awarding of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Trnava in Trnava by the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education of the Slovak Republic and subsequently granting of accreditation of a bachelor's professionally oriented Counseling study program in the department of social work. The study program opened from the academic year 2022/2023. The Slovak Accreditation Agency in its general summary report on study programs in Slovakia evaluated this study program positively. In Its opinion stated: one of the examples of interesting study programs is the study program counseling of the University of Trnava aimed at caring for and accompanying people in need, difficult disabled or disadvantaged and vulnerable population groups such as seniors or children. This offer includes a deep social dimension. Graduates will have a real opportunity to find employment in the field of social care and in the department of health and social services.

## 3 Opening of the department of counseling as a response to challenges of Pope Francis

### 3.1 Analysis of selected apostolic exhortations and encyclicals of Pope Francis

Counseling as an approach was chosen at the Faculty of Theology also because of the current challenge of Pope Francis. In his apostolic exhortations and encyclicals he implicitly and explicitly names counseling as "accompanying", while recommending it for application in the missionary and pastoral activities of the Church. By analyzing selected texts from the Pope Francis's documents, it is clear that he has known and clearly, since the beginning of his pontificate, identifies the counseling method. He calls for the implementation of accompanying several target groups - of families, engaged and newlyweds, divorcing and divorced spouses (Amoris Laetitia, Art. 30), the poor, the sick, women in difficult situations (Evangelii Gaudium, art. 214), victims of sexual abuse in the Church (Vos estis lux mundi, art.9), young people (Christus vivit", art. 30), seniors (Fratelli tutti, art. 20), health disabled persons or migrants (Amoris laetitia, Art. 30). He also recommends the establishment of "listening centers" - centers where people in various stress situations would find a complex of services including counseling services. The establishment of a similar type of center is also the goal of Trnava University in Trnava - Faculty of Theology.

Pope Francis perceives closeness, care, acceptance as the main elements of accompaniment and relationship. He also considers active listening of the accompanied to be very important. When describing the use and the realization of the processes of this approach thus approaches the scientific understanding of the

definition of counseling, with regard to the application of accompaniment to specific missions of the Church. He recommends to use it either in traditional catholic or secularized countries.

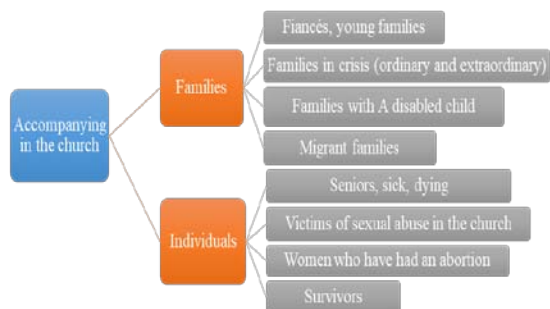


Fig. 1: Pope Francis' call to accompany specific target groups (Source: custom processing)

#### Evangelii Gaudium

Right at the beginning of his pontificate (2013), Pope Francis defines in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* accompaniment as one of the five basic attributes of the Church, which not only takes the initiative, gets involved, bears fruit, celebrates, but also "accompanies humanity to all of its journeys, no matter how difficult or long they may be." At the same time, he reminds that accompaniment should be connected with a clear goal, which is the ideal of the gospel, but it is important to patiently and authentically take into account the various stages of growth of accompanied persons (*Evangelii Gaudium*, Art. 45). Through accompaniment, it is possible to express care and strengthen the richness that already exists in Christendom. At the same time, it can be used to support new processes of evangelization in deeply secularized countries (*Evangelii Gaudium*, Art. 69).

In today's society wounded by anonymity and at the same time a huge desire for information about others, the Church needs a sense of closeness in order to contemplate, to feel emotion and stopping by the close person whenever necessary. In this way, priests as well as erudite pastoral workers, should educate in the field of "the art of accompanying", and thus to know how to feel the value of every human being who is accompanied by them. At the same time, the Pope Francis reminds that it is important to give progress a healthy rhythm of closeness with a view full of respect and compassion which, at the same time, heals, liberates and encourages maturing in the Christian life (*Evangelii Gaudium*, art. 169). At this point, we would like to note that pope Francis by the term "healthy rhythm of closeness" means the professional relationship and professional boundaries, which are required mainly from the erudite accompanying person (counselor) during the accompanying.

The basic technique of counseling as a method used in several spheres of activity is active listening. The importance of this technique is also noted by the Pope Francis when he says that everyone needs to practice the art of listening, which involves more than just the ability to hear. "The first thing in communication is the ability of the heart to allow closeness, without which there is no real spiritual encounter. Listening helps us find the appropriate gesture and word which forces us to leave the peaceful position of viewers. Based on this respectful listening itself, which is capable of compassion, it is possible to discover paths of authentic growth, to renew the desire for the Christian ideal and the effort to fully respond to God's love as well as the eagerness to develop it - the best that God has sown in a person's life." (*Evangelii Gaudium*, art. 171)

#### Amoris Laetitia

The post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (on love in the family) is another document of pope Francis, in which he

recommends implementing accompaniment in the Church, this time targeting engaged couples, young families and families in crisis. He used the term "accompanying" more than 40 times in this document, thus explicitly referring to its significance and usability in pastoral care. The Church should be a place with possibility to accompany and help in matters related to the growth of love, overcoming conflicts or raising children. Very specific are families with disabled children, or families of migrants, where he emphasizes the importance of integrating vulnerable persons and the importance of compassionate acceptance (*Amoris Laetitia*, Art. 47). Acceptance (of an accompanied person) is one of the main attributes of the definition of counseling, as already defined in the introduction of the article. In the exhortation, he devotes a lot of attention to accompanying betrothed and newlyweds. The preparation for marriage should emphasize that the engaged couple do not see the wedding as an end of journey, but to accept marriage as a vocation that moves them forward. Young couples need to be accompanied in such a way as to deepen and enrich their conscious and free decision to enter into marriage.

The Pope Francis clearly defines the spectrum of crises that every family goes through. It lists the common ones from separation from parents, birth of a child, problems of education to the "empty nest" crisis. However, personal crises are also added to these, connected with economic, work, emotional or spiritual problems that can change family life. Here, it is not a mistake to seek external - professional help (*Amoris Laetitia*, Art. 236). However, Pope Francis goes further, according to him, accompaniment has its place even after separations or divorces. Again, it recalls the acceptance of all persons who are going through separation, abandonment and loneliness. With the help of specialized counseling centers that he calls for establishing in each diocese, these persons should be accompanied with all care. It should not be forgotten about solving the economic aspect of family breakdown and eliminating trauma committed against children. Further, the Pope presents accompanying someone after death of spouses, while it is important that the escort knows the peculiarities of each stage of mourning and helped the mourning through this stressful period of life with his/her presence (*Amoris Laetitia*, art. 253).

#### Christus Vivit

Post-synodal apostolic exhortation of pope Francis called *Christus Vivit* is dedicated to young people and to all God's people. In it, Francis defines how to communicate with young people in today's world, who should be their example and how important it is to support their growth by accompanying them. Specific feature of today's youth is social involvement, while young people are not bypassed even volunteering, active citizenship and social solidarity. Here is the place for adults to accompany young people and encourage them in discovering their talents and abilities and creativity, which they will know how to use those in social engagement (*Christus Vivit*, art. 170). The Pope Francis also reminds that the Church should make the necessary efforts to accompany young people due to "cultural colonization" through which young people lose their most valuable features of individuality and identity. However, he adds, young people are also free human beings who, thanks to the accompaniment, can boldly and creatively find new ways to shepherd themselves. It would be useless to present them pastoral manuals rather than they should be offered to use their talent, skills and wit so they grow into mature Christians (*Christus Vivit*, no. 203). At this point, one cannot overlook that Pope Francis speaks of "help to self-help", which is a simple definition of counseling from a wider perspective.

The Pope Francis also adds, at the end of the exhortation, that the role of accompanying of young people has his/her family as a primary task, later community, which has a big value in the eyes of young people. At this point, Pope Francis also acknowledges that there is a lack of accompanying persons in parishes and therefore it is necessary to educate not only priests, but also active lay people who would be qualified for that kind of work. He appeals to religious and seminarians to be more capable to

accompany, as they take a responsible place in the life and guidance of young people (Christus Vivit, 245).

Very important part of the exhortation is paragraph 246, when Pope Francis states the expectations of young people due to the personality of the accompanying person. They have a clear idea of what he/she is like: a faithful christian, constantly striving for holiness, full of trust, non-judgmental, actively listening to needs of the young, he recognizes his limits, he/she knows how to recognize his humanity and therefore understands mistakes, he/she does not lead the young to a passive following, but walks alongside with them being active participants on the road. The guide should respect the freedom of young people and realistically see the possibilities that exist within the young to be able to use. All accompanying should receive solid basic training and strive for permanent formation (Christus Vivit 246). It is clearly very important for the guide in order to be able to guide, he/she himself/herself must undergo the path of growth by being guided and so not to impose his/her own plans about another's way of life.

### 3.2 Summary

In offered official documents of Pope Francis, we focused on his appeal to the use of guidance (counseling) in pastoral care. It is important to mention that across by most of his documents, the recommendation to accompany different groups in the Church and society occurs very often, while the Pope Francis clearly defines the methods of its application, the correct selection of tools and its appropriate location of use. It also expresses the need for formation of lay workers in family pastoral care with the help of psychologists, educators, social assistants and other experts, especially those with experience in accompanying. They have it a real tendency to embody pastoral proposals in the specific family worries. (*Amoris Laetitia*, Art. 204). If his message regarding accompaniment in the Church could be expressed by using specific elements in pastoral activity, from the point of view of Christianity, these could be acceptance by the accompanying person, active listening, expression of respect, empathy and acceptance of the accompanied person, married couple or family.

The opening of the new Counseling study program and the process of its following establishment in Slovakia is understood, by the Faculty of Theology, as a response not only to the appeals of Pope Francis, but also as a response to the actual situation in Slovak society.

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