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From Conciliar Optimism to Pastoral Realism: The Evolution of the Church's Post-Conciliar Reflection on Marriage and Family

Abstract: The article analyses the evolution of the Church's post-conciliar reflection on marriage and family life, moving from the pastoral optimism characteristic of the Second Vatican Council toward the pastoral realism present in the teaching of subsequent popes. The author demonstrates that the conciliar vision of marriage and family, grounded in personalist anthropology and the idea of the “domestic Church”, was based on the conviction that harmonious dialogue between the Church and the modern world was possible. However, processes of secularization, individualization of social life, and the cultural transformations of the second half of the twentieth century weakened the social significance of religion and challenged the anthropological foundations of marriage and family. The article concludes that pastoral realism does not signify abandoning the conciliar vision of marriage and family but rather represents an effort to reinterpret it more adequately in a world marked by secularization, individualism, and anthropological crisis.

Keywords: Second Vatican Council, marriage, family, secularization, Church-world dialogue.

Introduction

In the face of disappointment with the “Church” after the Second Vatican Council – disappointment which, in the eyes of many believers, results from the secularization of the Church, the loss of the sense of the sacred, or arbitrary interpretations of the Gospel – there is a need for theological reflection that will not only justify the necessity of conciliar renewal, but also provide a remedy for actual abuses and halt the tendency toward an immature “traditionalism”. Indeed, the Second Vatican Council constituted a genuine turn toward the modern world, intended by God – if one remains faithful to the Gospel and to the Church's

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teaching throughout the centuries – at a time when the world was increasingly failing to understand the Christian message. The Council did not change the dogmas of faith; rather, it introduced a profound reform in the way contemporary humanity encounters the Gospel. In a narrower sense, it also marked an important moment in the renewal of the Church's reflection on marriage and family. The conciliar documents reveal a clear departure from an exclusively juridical understanding of marriage toward a personalist perspective that emphasizes its sacramental and dialogical character. Of particular importance here is the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*, which presents marriage as an "intimate partnership of life and love" (cf. GS 48) and the family as a fundamental social reality (cf. GS 48, 52).

Post-conciliar reflection on marriage and family developed in a climate of profound anthropological and pastoral optimism. Many post-conciliar interpretations reflected the expectation that the renewed perspective would facilitate dialogue with the modern world and increase the attractiveness of the Christian vision of marriage and family. Although greater involvement of the laity in the Church's mission could indeed be observed – partly as a result of the Council's reflection on the place and role of the laity in the Church – over time it became evident that the dominant currents of contemporary culture were increasingly diverging from the Council's proposal¹. Processes of secularization, the growth of individualism, the weakening of the social significance of religion, the sexual revolution, and transformations in models of family life caused many conciliar intuitions to lose their character of cultural obviousness. Moreover, it became clear that secularization is not simply a matter of "the weakening of religious practice", but rather a profound transformation of the cultural conditions within which marriage and family function as structures of meaning². In general, this has led to a shift in emphasis: away from asking why people are "departing" from the Church's teaching (that is, failing to live according to it), and toward asking how this teaching can be more effectively lived out under new cultural conditions.

Andrzej Pastwa observes that the event of Vatican II undoubtedly brought about a "profound reorientation of ecclesiological thought," in which "the vision

¹ Numerous sociological studies indicate a continuing decline in religious practice, a growing acceptance of non-traditional family forms, and an increasing emphasis on individual autonomy in moral decision-making. These trends have significantly reshaped the cultural environment within which Christian teaching on marriage and family is received. Cf. W. Kawecki, *Reinterpretacja chrześcijańskiej kultury w świetle ponowoczesności*, w: *Kościół a kultura*, red. A.A. Napiórkowski, Kraków 2024, p. 193-215; S.V. Mehrjardi, *Factors leading to Decline in Church Attendance in the Present Age*, "Religious Inquiries" 2022, no 2, p. 221-231.

² Cf. J. Mariański, *Rodzina – co się z nią dzieje? Opinie i poglądy polskiej młodzieży. Studium socjologiczne*, Lublin 2024. For Charles Taylor, secularization means above all a "change in the conditions of belief", in which faith ceases to be a social given and instead becomes one among many possible options for interpreting reality. Cf. Ch. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge-London 2007, p. 3.

of a centralized institution resembling a state was replaced by the image of a divine-human *communio*: a community of gift, dialogue, and participation”³. This vision found its reflection in the development of post-conciliar theology of marriage and family. Władysław Nowak emphasizes that the term “domestic Church”, still vibrant since the time of the Council (and thanks to it), assigns to the family a crucial role in transmitting the faith, practicing prayer, and participating in Christ’s priestly, prophetic, and kingly mission⁴. Despite what seemed to be a “positive change”, the earlier optimism gradually faded. The aim of this article is to examine the evolution of the Church’s post-conciliar reflection on marriage and family, focusing on the gradual transition from the anthropological and pastoral optimism characteristic of the Second Vatican Council to the more realistic pastoral approach evident in the teaching of subsequent pontificates. By showing the nature of the evolution of the Church’s post-conciliar reflection on marriage and family – mainly through the example of three pontificates, which in many ways reflect the situation of the Church in the world – the article also addresses the question of to what extent cultural transformations and the process of secularization have affected the possibility of realizing the conciliar vision of marriage and family in the contemporary world⁵.

Methodologically, the study employs a theological-hermeneutical and comparative approach. It analyses selected magisterial texts of the Second Vatican Council and the post-conciliar pontificates of John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis in order to identify both the continuity and the development of the Church’s reflection on marriage and family. These three pontificates were selected because they represent successive stages in the reception of Vatican II within distinct cultural and ecclesial contexts: John Paul II developed the Council’s personalist anthropology of marriage and family, Benedict XVI addressed its challenges in the context of relativism and secularization, while Francis has emphasized pastoral accompaniment in response to increasingly complex family situations. The comparison of these pontificates makes it possible to trace the transition from the conciliar optimism characteristic of the immediate post-conciliar period to the pastoral realism that increasingly marks contemporary ecclesial reflection.

Conciliar Optimism toward Marriage and Family

The Second Vatican Council’s reflection on marriage and family took place within the broader context of ecclesiological, anthropological, and pastoral renewal. It emerged from a deeply personalist vision of the human person and

³ A. Pastwa, *Istotne elementy małżeństwa. W nurcie odnowy personalistycznej*, Katowice 2007, p. 11.

⁴ Zob. W. Nowak, *Liturgia Kościoła domowego po Soborze Watykańskim II*, “Roczniki Teologiczne” 2003, no 8, p. 147-148.

⁵ Cf. S. Tykarski, *The evolution of modern marriage: from community to individualization. Theological reflection*, “Cauriensia. Revista Anualde Ciencias Eclesiásticas” 2019, p. 14.

from a somewhat different understanding of the relationship between the Church and the world, one inspired more profoundly by the pedagogy of Jesus. Consequently, the value of marriage and family was no longer justified primarily by their social or procreative function, but rather by the dignity of the human person and the person's vocation to communion. This perspective was later developed in *Familiaris consortio* (nos 11-13), where John Paul II emphasized the communitarian and personalist dimensions of marriage. The human being, called to relationship, freedom, and transcendence, finds in married and family life the proper environment in which to realize the purpose of existence. The Council therefore emphasizes that the human person "cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self" (GS 24). It is precisely this logic of self-gift that becomes one of the most important foundations of the conciliar understanding of marriage and family. Conciliar anthropology situates the person within community – marital, familial, but also religious community life. John Paul II would later write that "the family is the first and, in many respects, the most important way. It is a universal way, while remaining something particular, unique and unrepeatable, just as every person is unique and unrepeatable. The family is the way from which man cannot detach himself" (*Letter to Families*, 2)⁶.

The Council presented marriage as a sacramental covenant rather than a legal contract. "The sacrament of marriage", writes Krzysztof Jeżyna, "is a sign of being endowed with God's saving love and a reminder of the sacrificial character of this love"⁷. It was assumed that a man and a woman are capable (that is, sufficiently mature) of entering into a profound relationship of love, one that finds its image in the relationship between Christ and the Church (cf. Eph 5:21-33). They are therefore open to the gift of the New Covenant, sharing this gift first with one another, then with their children, and finally with other people. In this way, the Council Fathers pointed to "spousal love" as the ideal of marital love (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 48-49)⁸.

This understanding of marriage significantly influenced the Church's teaching on the family. Likewise, the return to the biblical term "domestic Church" (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 11), together with the expression "domestic sanctuary of the Church" (cf. *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 11), became deeply integrated into post-conciliar ecclesiological reflection. As Roman Buchta observes, "from this perspective, the family becomes a community of salvation and thus identifies itself with the Church as a community of salvation"⁹. The

⁶ Zob. M. Waluś, *Gratissimam sane. Rodzina drogą Kościoła. Próby refleksji po latach*, "Teologia i Moralność" 2024, no 2, p. 125-137.

⁷ K. Jeżyna, *Małżeństwo sakramentalne w misji nowej ewangelizacji*, "Roczniki Teologii Moralnej" 2009, no 1, p. 147.

⁸ Cf. I. Jacob, *Marriage as a divine and human reality in the vision of the second Vatican Council*, "Dialog Teologic" 2022, no 25, p. 164-180.

⁹ R. Buchta, "Kościół domowy" – rodzina uczestnicząca w życiu wspólnoty parafii. *Studium na podstawie badań w archidiecezji katowickiej*, "Teologia i Człowiek" 2024, no 2, p. 158; cf.

family, insofar as it constitutes a form of catechumenate (a “family catechumenate”), also becomes the place where mature personality, virtue, and the ability to live socially are formed – it becomes a school of humanity. *Gaudium et spes* emphasizes that “the well-being of the individual person and of both human and Christian society is closely bound up with the healthy state of conjugal and family life” (GS 47). For this reason, marriage and family within the Church were regarded as guarantees of the integral development of both the person and society. Consequently, concern for marriage and family was not merely an element of the Church’s moral teaching, but part of its mission itself: service to the human person¹⁰.

The family was no longer understood merely as an “object of pastoral care”, but became an active subject of the Church’s life: a place of education, participation in the liturgy (the “domestic liturgy”), and realization of the common priesthood of the faithful. The baptismal priesthood of husband and wife, realized through the sacrament of marriage, was understood analogously to the priesthood of the ordained minister realized through the sacrament of Holy Orders¹¹. The family home thus became a school of Christian life, “a school of deeper humanity” (CCC 1657). Moreover, the Council’s discernment regarding marriage and family formed part of a broader affirmation of “earthly realities”, grounded in the conviction that harmonious dialogue with contemporary culture was possible. The Council recognized that “earthly realities” possess their own autonomy, which is not opposed to Christian faith (cf. GS 36)¹². This also affected the Church’s understanding of other religions. Marriage and family were to be regarded as privileged spaces for the realization of this dialogue.

The conciliar vision appears to presuppose a relatively high degree of religious maturity among believers, as well as their capacity to make responsible use of natural values in shaping faith (that is, in fostering a conscious and critical faith). The Christian family was meant to become an authentic environment for the transmission and development of faith and evangelical values, and therefore a place of the Church’s active presence in the modern world. The prevailing conviction was that the renewed vision of marriage and family corresponded both to the Creator’s plan and to the deepest needs of the human person, as well as to the direction of contemporary social development. In retrospect, some interpretations of the reception of Vatican II have suggested that the Council’s pastoral orientation reflected a considerable degree of optimism regarding the

J.C. Atkinson, *Family as Domestic Church: developmental trajectory, legitimacy, and problems of appropriation*, “Theological Studies” 2005, no 66, p. 592-604.

¹⁰ Cf. J. Goleń, *Rola świadectwa w rodzinie*, “Verbum Vitae” 2015, no 28, p. 423-458.

¹¹ It is especially here, within the family, that the baptismal priesthood of the father, mother, children, and all members of the family community is exercised “through the reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, self-denial, and active charity (KK 10)”. Cf. W. Nowak, *Liturgia Kościoła domowego po Soborze Watykańskim II*, p. 148.

¹² Cf. J. Gocko, *Problematyka moralna zasady autonomii rzeczywistości ziemskich*, “Roczniki Teologiczne” 2003, no 3, p. 107-121.

future relationship between the Church and modern culture¹³. The following section examines how changing global conditions influenced the evolution of the Church's post-conciliar reflection on marriage and family.

At the same time, it would be inaccurate to interpret the post-conciliar period solely through the lens of secularization and cultural crisis. The renewal initiated by Vatican II also generated important opportunities for ecclesial development. Increased participation of the laity in the Church's mission, the emergence of new forms of family ministry, the growth of ecclesial movements and communities, and a renewed awareness of the family as a subject of evangelization all testify to the enduring vitality of the Council's vision. These developments suggest that the reception of Vatican II has been marked not only by tensions and challenges but also by significant forms of renewal within the life of the Church¹⁴.

Cultural Crisis and the Limits of Realizing the Conciliar Vision

Soon after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council and the first attempts to implement its resolutions – contained both in the conciliar documents themselves and in subsequent instructions intended to introduce the reforms – it became increasingly evident that growing tensions were emerging between the Church's position (including its vision of marriage and family) and the profound transformations taking place in the modern world. This does not, of course, mean that the Church made a mistake. One may, however, ask to what extent the Church is capable of remaining faithful to the reality it helped shape (by overwhelmingly supporting *aggiornamento*) while at the same time responding adequately and realistically to these transformations. There is always the danger that an adopted ideal may become excessively rigid and resistant to further theological discernment, preventing believers from following the Spirit of Truth, whose inspiration continually calls for renewed contemplation of the Word of God (cf. Mk 2:21-22; Lk 5:36-37)¹⁵.

What, then, happened to the world that it did not accept the Church's proposal? At the close of the Second Vatican Council, the Church still assumed the possibility of a harmonious coexistence between the Christian vision of the human person and the processes of modernization. The following decades, however, brought changes that increasingly undermined both the religious and anthropological foundations of the traditional understanding of marriage and family. The cultural transformations of the second half of the twentieth century fundamentally altered the social and anthropological conditions within which the conciliar vision could prove viable. Recalling the diagnosis of Charles Taylor

¹³ Cf. C.E. Clifford, *Decoding Vatican II: Interpretation and ongoing reception*, New Jersey 2014, p. 112-124.

¹⁴ Cf. G. O'Collins, *Does Vatican II represent continuity or discontinuity?*, "Theological Studies" 2012, no 73, p. 768-794.

¹⁵ Cf. G. Maj, *Duch Święty prowadzi ku zbawieniu*, "Studia Elckie" 2014, no 4, p. 545-557.

already mentioned above, “the conditions of belief” changed – religion ceased to be necessary, self-evident, and credible; it became merely one possible option among many for interpreting reality. With each passing decade, in many Western societies, Christianity has gradually lost a significant part of its former influence on public culture, moral discourse, and the transmission of religious beliefs, although the extent and pace of these processes vary considerably across regions and social groups¹⁶.

In many secularized Western societies, the Church ceased to function as a primary cultural reference point for social life. Consequently, it also lost its decisive influence on the formation of the human person according to the vision it proposed (the family itself ceased to fulfill the role of a catechumenate). In place of stable communal structures such as the family, increasing importance came to be attached to the individual, personal freedom, self-realization, and the subjective experience of happiness¹⁷. As a result, both marriage – understood as a permanent community of life – and the family – understood as a fundamental good of society – became problematic realities. Most importantly, the issue can no longer be reduced simply to a crisis of morality; rather, it concerns a transformation of the entire cultural context. Within such a context, the Church is often perceived as an institution limiting individual autonomy and self-realization. In either case, significant sectors of contemporary Western culture did not adopt the Church’s proposal¹⁸. Were the responses undertaken by successive popes aware of this reality?

First, the popes – building upon the development of theology – had to formulate an adequate diagnosis of the situation. John Paul II observed that a defining feature of contemporary culture is the separation of freedom from the truth about the human person, which leads to a permanent crisis of interpersonal relationships and, consequently, of the very understanding of love (cf. *Veritatis splendor*, 32-35). As a result, marriage loses its supernatural dimension, while the proposed category of the “gift of self” becomes impossible to realize. The only attainable reality within a culture of individualism is one confined to the temporariness of human bonds. Consequently, such values as permanence, fidelity, and indissolubility begin to appear excessively demanding – if not outright oppressive. The Polish pope developed this diagnosis especially in *Familiaris consortio* (nos 6-11, 33-34) and *Veritatis splendor* (nos 32-35, 84-87).

¹⁶ In the twenty-first century, many thinkers already perceive the world as post-Christian. Cf. Ch. Delsol, *Koniec świata chrześcijańskiego. Inwersja normatywna i nowy wiek*, Kraków 2023; R. Barron, *Po pierwsze Chrystus. W kierunku postliberalnego katolicyzmu*, Warszawa 2021; T. Dola, *Chrześcijanin w postchrześcijańskim świecie*, “Teologia. Kultura. Społeczeństwo” 2019, no 5, p. 23-36; S. Gałęcki, *Postchrześcijaństwo – idea czy rzeczywistość*, “Veritati et Caritati” 2015, no 4, p. 481-513.

¹⁷ Cf. A. Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, Stanford 1992, p. 58-65.

¹⁸ Cf. J. Mariański, *Religia i Kościół katolicki w społeczeństwie pluralistycznym*, “Roczniki Teologiczne” 2024, no 1, p. 25-50.

Benedict XVI perceived the crisis of marriage in a similar spirit – not merely as a moral problem, but as a manifestation of a “new” understanding of the human person. According to him, marriage (and consequently the family) is no longer recognized as a reality grounded in anthropology but rather becomes a construct of a fluid and changing worldview, dependent upon the subjective decisions of individuals (cf. *Deus caritas est*, 6-7). This is the result of the fact that the Christian vision of the human person has ceased to function as a point of reference for Christian life. Marriage and family lose their rootedness in the sacramental order, thereby exposing themselves to continual redefinitions of the human person and of truth itself, driven by cultural change. Benedict XVI develops this diagnosis particularly in *Caritas in veritate* (nos 26, 44, 75) and *Sacramentum caritatis* (nos 29, 83).

Francis, while fully aware of the diagnoses formulated by his predecessors and equally conscious of the instability of contemporary culture, seeks above all to describe the situation from the perspective of the lived experience of modern individuals¹⁹, who often require not so much catechesis as a kind of “spiritual therapy”. He thus recognizes the fear of permanent commitment, economic insecurity, loneliness, and emotional immaturity (even prior to moral immaturity) (cf. *Amoris laetitia*, 39-42). He further observes that the family itself has become one of the victims of the “throwaway culture” (cf. *Amoris laetitia*, 43). It can be observed that Francis shifts the focus of reflection – in response to contemporary transformations – from culture itself to the concrete human person and the situation in which he or she inevitably finds himself or herself. In addition to *Amoris laetitia*, Francis develops this diagnosis especially in *Evangelii gaudium* (nos 61-67) and *Christus vivit* (nos 87-94).

Second, when examining these diagnoses, an evolution can also be discerned in the approach of the popes (and of the Church itself) toward the ideal inherited from the Second Vatican Council. None of the popes abandons the Christian ideal of marriage; rather, each seeks to reinterpret it within a new cultural context and within new conditions shaping human existence. Importantly, none of these renewed perspectives relativizes the vision intended by the Council. Instead, each pope seeks to view the surrounding world more realistically in light of that ideal, taking into account both human weakness and the complexity of contemporary family situations resulting from rapid civilizational progress. These diagnoses may be interpreted as indicating a growing awareness of the limitations of some of the optimistic assumptions associated with the post-conciliar reception of Vatican II.

¹⁹ Francis, while fully aware of the diagnoses formulated by his predecessors and equally conscious of the instability of contemporary culture, seeks above all to describe the situation from the perspective of the lived experience of modern individuals, who often require not only doctrinal instruction but also forms of pastoral accompaniment aimed at healing personal wounds, restoring trust, and fostering spiritual growth. Cf. R. Luciani, *Pope Francis and the theology of the people*, London 2018.

The Church's response, however, cannot consist either in adapting itself to the logic of contemporary culture (and thus to human weakness), or in tightening religious norms (which would imply a return to older theological models), nor in adopting a strategy of cultural confrontation. Rather, the Church, following the example of its Master, must remain close to the human person, engaging in a "dialogue of salvation" appropriate to the person's level of understanding of the truths of faith. In essence – as Francis in particular has emphasized – the Church requires a "pastoral conversion", one expressed through a pastoral ministry of closeness, discernment, and accompaniment²⁰. It is precisely here that the transition from conciliar optimism to the realism of the Church's mission toward the concrete people of a given age becomes most apparent. In fact, such a strategy may ultimately be described as the pedagogy of Jesus himself. The Church therefore preserves the ideal of marriage and family, while increasingly recognizing that its realization must take place within a culture deeply marked by individualism, insecurity, and secularization.

From Optimism to Pastoral Realism

The evolution of the Church's post-conciliar reflection on marriage and family does not signify a departure from the key intuitions of the Second Vatican Council, but rather their reinterpretation within the changing cultural and social conditions of the contemporary world. In many predominantly Catholic societies of the mid-twentieth century, the Church continued to exercise considerable influence on public attitudes toward marriage and family life; however, the following decades profoundly transformed the relationship between the Church and the world. Although the Church continues to remain close to the human person, its normative authority regarding marriage and family is increasingly contested in many Western societies, particularly among younger generations and within highly secularized cultural contexts²¹.

The evolution may now be reconsidered that has taken place over the last decades. Our starting point remains the Council's enduring personalist anthropology²². John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis all agree on the fundamental conviction that the human person can fulfill himself or herself (realize one's potential) through love understood as self-gift, which presupposes the existence of community: marital, familial, and ecclesial. Each pope, however,

²⁰ Cf. D. Kurzydło, "Nawrócenie na człowieka" jako kategoria teologiczna i antropologiczna, „Ateneum Kapłańskie” 2026, no 3, p. 421-438.

²¹ It is also worth considering this issue from the perspective of religious education. Cf. W. Sadłoń, *Edukacja religijna w kontekście przemian religijności. Dwie perspektywy badawcze*, „Uniwersyteckie Czasopismo Socjologiczne” 2016, no 4, p. 58-66.

²² Although, strictly speaking, the Council did not create personalism, it adopted its language and incorporated it into the teaching of the Church. In this context, the key statement comes from *Gaudium et spes* (nr 24): "Man [...] cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self". Zob. B. Gacka, *Personalizm chrześcijański kluczem Soboru Watykańskiego II*, "Teologia w Polsce" 2012, no 1, p. 63-75.

formulates this truth within a particular cultural context – within circumstances in which this ideal can realistically be lived out. In this sense, the successive pontificates may be understood as stages in the deepening reception of Vatican II within a world increasingly distancing itself, for various reasons, from the Christian and personalist vision of the human person²³.

John Paul II developed the Council's reflection primarily through a deeper articulation of the Christian anthropology of marriage and family. In *Familiaris consortio* (cf. no. 86), he wrote that “the future of humanity passes by way of the family”. At that time, however, he did not yet perceive the “cultural crisis” as a consolidated pattern of global development capable of fundamentally transforming the understanding of the human person. The Pope believed that the source of the crisis of marriage lay in a distorted understanding of freedom, and that human beings could still be liberated toward authentic freedom. “Freedom” he insisted to contemporary humanity, “cannot merely be possessed or consumed; it must constantly be won and created through truth”²⁴. John Paul II understood the problem of freedom as an anthropological crisis, and he feared that by abandoning authentic freedom, the human person would lose the ability to understand himself or herself as a being called to live in lasting communion (cf. *Veritatis splendor*, 84-85).

Benedict XVI, however, already observes the consequences of this crisis, describing it more broadly as a “crisis of truth”. In his view, this crisis lies at the root of the breakdown of marriages and the growing number of incomplete families. He argues that Western culture, which effectively lives “as if God did not exist”, destroys social bonds and thereby leads the human person toward confusion and loneliness. He referred to this phenomenon as “dictatorship of relativism”²⁵. Under such conditions, Christian marriage ceases to function as a social norm and instead becomes a countercultural witness. The Pope is fully aware that the Church is losing the cultural support once available for its vision of the human person and the family. Like his predecessor, he points to a distorted understanding of the human person (cf. *Caritas in veritate*, 75), yet he increasingly recognizes that permanence, fidelity, and the indissolubility of marriage are no longer perceived as objective values, but rather as matters of personal preference and emotional comfort²⁶.

²³ Posthumanism and transhumanism are currently manifestations of a complete departure from personalist anthropology. More on that, cf. D. Kurzydło, *Osobopodobni. Podmioty ludzkie i nie-ludzkie w czasach transhumanizmu/posthumanizmu a rozumienie osoby – perspektywa psychologii personalistycznej*, “Ateneum Kapłańskie” 2025, no 3, p. 506-568.

²⁴ Jan Paweł II, *Homilia w czasie Mszy św. odprawionej na placu Zwycięstwa*, Warszawa, 2 czerwca 1979, in: *Pielgrzymki do Ojczyzny. Przemówienia i homilie*, Kraków 2005, p. 15.

²⁵ J. Ratzinger, *Homilia podczas Mszy św. “Pro eligendo Romano Pontifice”*, St. Peter's Basilica, 18.04.2005 r., “L'Osservatore Romano” 2005, no 5, p. 17.

²⁶ Cf. M. Kluz, *Searching for Human Dignity: The Anthropological Dimension of Moral Teachings of Benedict XVI*, “The Person and the Challenges” 2024, no 1, p. 59-73.

Francis essentially accepts this diagnosis, but instead of remaining focused on criticism of the “culture of individualism”, he radically shifts the emphasis from doctrinal analysis (including conciliar analysis) toward an existential and pastoral perspective. One may even suspect that this was the original intention of conciliar renewal itself, although at the time cultural conditions still favored the Church’s traditional mission. In his homilies and documents, Francis describes the modern world in terms of the fragility of human relationships (cf. *Amoris laetitia*, 33, 39), while simultaneously encouraging the Church to “go forth” toward the human person. To a culture marked by loneliness, he proposes the remedy of encounter, dialogue, and acceptance. He recognizes that merely repeating moral norms changes little; consequently, he proposes what he sees as a more effective path: accompanying people living in complicated and often painful family situations. Without abandoning the conciliar ideal of marriage – something he repeatedly emphasizes – Francis advocates a relational, existential, and pastoral style characterized by accompaniment, discernment, mercy, and attention to the concrete existential situations of individuals and families (cf. *Fratelli tutti*, 105)²⁷.

The Second Vatican Council had assumed the possibility of harmonious dialogue with the world in order to convince humanity of the truth of its vision. It presumed that culture retained the capacity to engage in serious reflection concerning peace, the resolution of urgent global problems, and the formation of mature human relationships. The following decades, however, demonstrated that the processes of secularization were so profound that they also weakened the ability of Christian communities themselves to grow toward fullness, leading to serious identity crises within the Church, manifested in moral scandals and a decline in vocations. The decreasing number of marriages, the rise in divorce rates, and the increasing prevalence of nuclear, blended (“patchwork”), and single-parent families²⁸ further intensify the Church’s inability to resolve the crisis and to realize the conciliar “dream” of holy marriage and happy family life modeled after the Family of Nazareth.

Pastoral realism, however, does not mean abandoning the ideal. On the contrary, one may gain the impression that many intuitions of Vatican II today appear more prophetic than culturally self-evident. Viewed not statistically but qualitatively, Christian marriage and family life lived according to this ideal can still constitute a credible witness to a life grounded in responsibility and self-gift within a culture dominated by individualism and transience. If the Spirit speaking to the Churches (cf. Rev 2-3) “required” the renewal brought about by

²⁷ Cf. M. Rembierz, *Pedagogia towarzyszenia i miłosierdzia jako wyjście na peryferia i dążenie do inkluzji – o interpretacji dynamiki i napięć pedagogii ignacjańskiej papieża Franciszka w nieprzejrzystym świecie*, “Horyzonty Wychowania” 2022, no 21, p. 63-79.

²⁸ Cf. Z. Kawka, *Przemiany rodziny w Polsce z perspektywy statystycznej. Między kryzysem a nadzieją*, in: *Nowy ład? Dynamika struktur społecznych we współczesnych społeczeństwach*, ed. I. Grotowska-Leder, E. Rokicka, Łódź 2013, p. 399-410.

the Council, then today the Church needs determination in seeking ways of being present in the world such that humanity may once again become fascinated with Christ and with His vision of the human person. Will this take the form suggested by Marek Kita, who writes that “the Church should not be a mass organization, but a network of open spiritual shelters”²⁹? Or perhaps some new version of the conciliar model of autonomy and cooperation? Or maybe we will simply return to the “pedagogy of Jesus” (cf. DGC 59), to which Francis indirectly calls the Church, rediscovering the meaning of the simplest human bonds and the simplicity of life itself?

Conclusion

Beata Parysiewicz observes that today we are witnessing an “organized and systematic siege of the family”, the sources of which lie in ideological, cultural, and legal transformations. She emphasizes that marriage and family belong to the “most precious goods”, yet contemporary culture increasingly questions their permanent and normative character³⁰. Some Catholic authors interpret contemporary ideological, legal, and cultural transformations as posing serious challenges to the stability and social recognition of marriage and family. Regardless of the terminology employed, there is broad agreement that profound changes in family structures and value systems have reshaped the social context in which Christian families live and develop. Anyway the gap between the conciliar understanding of marriage and family and the dominant logic of postmodern culture continues to widen. Faced with technological “progress,” the human person increasingly loses his or her subjectivity. Religion – also as a consequence of excessive radicalism in liturgical reform – tends to retreat once again into the sphere of a “distant sacred.” All of this makes the full realization of conciliar renewal difficult, since that renewal has ceased to be culturally self-evident and ecclesial dynamic.

And yet the Council must remain a point of reference – such, indeed, was the intention of the Spirit guiding history. Even if the world has become anti-Christian, it seems all the more necessary to revise overly optimistic expectations and rediscover what the Spirit truly said to the Church. This, together with an awareness of the culture in which we function daily, constitutes one of the greatest achievements resulting from reflection on the evolution of conciliar thought. The Council neither erred nor became obsolete; rather, the historical and cultural conditions within which we must struggle to uncover the treasure it buried in the soil of the modern world have fundamentally changed. Nevertheless, the same historical period has also witnessed numerous initiatives of ecclesial renewal, particularly in family ministry, lay leadership, and new

²⁹ M. Kita, *Minimalizm. W imię tego, co największe*, “Więź” 2024, no 1, p. 70-82.

³⁰ Cf. B. Parysiewicz, *Zagrożenia małżeństwa i rodziny*, “Roczniki Nauk o Rodzinie i Pracy Socjalnej” 2012, no 4, p. 21; M. Kluz, *Searching for human dignity*, p. 60-64.

forms of evangelization, which demonstrate that the conciliar vision continues to inspire Christian communities in diverse cultural settings.

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