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Thinking and Doing Christian Social Ethics in Croatia

Abstract

The Croatian approach to Christian Social Ethics over the last 30 years or so has been marked by the interplay between the Social Teaching of the Church and theological efforts to apply it to the concrete Church and social practice in Croatia. In order to provide an understanding of the Croatian context, the first part of the paper highlights the historical, social, and cultural context that places Croatia within the Central European cultural sphere. Since the 1990 democratic turnaround, interest in the Social Teaching of the Church has been increasing both in Croatian society and within the Croatian Church. From a theological perspective, the response came with the establishment of the Chair in Social Teaching of the Church (2000) at the Catholic Faculty of Theology of the University of Zagreb. The official Church response came with the foundation and opening (1998) of the Centre for the Promotion of the Social Teaching of the Church. The paper sets out to demonstrate the Croatian model of thinking and doing Christian Social Ethics, offering a concrete blueprint for the practical application of the Social Teaching of the Church in Croatia. This model boasts specific features that can be compared with the development of Christian Social Ethics in other countries and cultural contexts where Christians live and work.

Zusammenfassung

Der kroatische Zugang zur Christlichen Sozialethik liegt seit rund dreißig Jahren in der Verknüpfung der Katholischen Soziallehre mit dem theologischen Einsatz für ihre Umsetzung im konkreten Leben von Kirche und Gesellschaft. Zum leichteren Verständnis der Gegebenheiten in Kroatien geht der erste Teil des Beitrags auf den gesellschafts- und kulturgeschichtlichen Kontext ein, der Kroatien in den mitteleuropäischen Kulturkreis einbettet. Nach der Wende im Jahre 1990 gab es in Gesellschaft und Kirche ein starkes Interesse für die Katholische Soziallehre. Als Reaktion darauf wurde von theologischer Seite der Lehrstuhl für Katholische Soziallehre an der Katholisch-Theologischen Fakultät der Universität Zagreb (2000) sowie von Seiten der Amtskirche das Zentrum zur Förderung der katholischen Soziallehre gegründet und offiziell eröffnet (1998). Der Beitrag zeichnet das kroatische Modell nach, wie Christliche Sozialethik in Kroatien gedacht und praktiziert wird und wie dort die Katholische Soziallehre praktisch zur Anwendung kommt und kommen kann. Dieses Modell hat seine Besonderheiten, die sich mit der Entwicklung der Christlichen Sozialethik in anderen Ländern und Kulturkreisen, in denen Christen leben und wirken, vergleichen lassen.

1 Introduction

Any theological deliberation on Christian Social Ethics (hereafter: CSE) in Catholic theology must take into account various scientific approaches

in different parts of the Catholic Church worldwide. Such approaches are frequently, on the one hand, the result of the historical development of Catholic social thought in a specific part of the Catholic Church. On the other hand, they stem from the theological development or interpretation of individual social documents of the Church, starting from the first social encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (15 May 1891). Theological social ethics, i. e. the relationship between the Church and the pluralistic society in which Christians and Catholics live, has been exceedingly significant for the Catholic Church, as evidenced by the fact that over 40 official documents on social issues have been published by the Catholic Church since 1891.

Since the late 19th century, Catholic social thought has been developing in two, more or less interdependent, directions. The first direction, which should serve as a certain source and inspiration, is the official Social Teaching of the Catholic Church outlined in social encyclicals and other social documents.

The second direction involves various theological and interdisciplinary approaches that seek, with a varying degree of success, to analyse and examine the social thought, i. e., the Social Teaching of the Church from a scientific perspective and contrast it with the multitude of challenges in a particular social and historical moment.

Undoubtedly, CSE faces profound challenges today. This was demonstrated at the international scientific symposium on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Institute for Christian Social Sciences in Münster, under the compelling title: *Christian Social Ethics – Simultaneously a Scientific, Social, and Theological Discipline* (cf. Heimbach-Steins/Bachmann 2022).

As an active participant in the development of Christian Social Ethics (the Social Teaching of the Church) in Croatia over the past 30 years, I have read with great interest the works in the thematic section of volume 63 (2022) of the volume *Jahrbuch für Christliche Sozialwissenschaften*, where authors from the German-speaking area attempt, from a scientific perspective, to highlight the theological profile and possible directions of the interdisciplinary development of CSE and its development as a scientific discipline between social sciences, theology, society, and the Church (among others, cf. Vogt 2022; Filipović 2022). Although such theological and interdisciplinary scientific discussions have not been taking place in Croatia, since the 1990 democratic turnaround, CSE has been increasingly perceived as a theological discipline bearing

significant possibilities for interdisciplinary collaboration with certain social sciences. The focus of these attempts is the practical application of the Social Teaching of the Church¹ in the specific Church and social context in Croatia.

Starting from this point, this paper provides a brief panoramic overview of Christian Social Ethics (the Social Teaching of the Church) in Croatia with a particular emphasis on the period after 1990. We explore this through two points: 1. Historical, social and cultural circumstances and 2. Social Teaching of the Church (Christian Social Ethics) seeking its place in both the Church and social life in Croatia.

2 Historical, social and cultural circumstances

To facilitate an understanding of CSE, i. e. the Social Teaching of the Church in Croatia, it is important to highlight briefly the historical, social, and cultural context.

The territory of the state of Croatia, which has been a full member of the European Union since 2013, encompasses the area of Central Europe. Until 1918, most of Croatia was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This fact had largely determined the cultural, religious, and ecclesiastical development of the Croatian people. The visible sign of this centuries-long affiliation with the Central European cultural circle and life within the Austro-Hungarian Empire is the architecture of the capital city of Zagreb, which is evident to every tourist visiting the city today.

A major change from a socio-political perspective occurred in 1918 after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire when Croatian politicians opted for life in a new entity – the State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs. Dominated by the Serbian people, the state became the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in 1921 and was transformed into the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929. Following the end of the Second World War in 1945, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was founded, ruled by the Communist Party until its dissolution in 1990. That same year, in the first democratic elections, Croats exercised their will to establish a free and democratic state, Croatia. In the defensive Homeland War

1 In Croatia, the term Social Teaching of the Church refers not only to the official social documents, but also to theoretical discussions, that is, to what is referred to as CSE in the German-speaking area. Both terms are used in this paper.

(1991–1995), Croatia defended its territory against the Yugoslav People's Army and Serbian paramilitary units. Dissatisfied with the loss of Serbian hegemony in the former Yugoslavia, these forces engaged in armed aggression on the free democratic state of Croatia, causing immense human casualties and inflicting widespread destruction.

Therefore, the Croatian people have been inhabiting the Central European cultural circle for centuries. After 1918, a stronger connection with Southeast Europe had been formed, which had also implied Eastern cultural influence, and ultimately negatively impacted the mentality of Croats and Croatian citizens. The *Croatian homecoming* in 1990, brought the country back to its natural Central European cultural circle.

The early years in democratic Croatia brimmed with high expectations, which gradually turned into dissatisfaction with the *outcome*, as the external socio-political changes failed to deliver real meaningful changes, in particular with regard to the political elites who largely retained the *former communist mentality*. In that context, in the early 1990s, the entire Croatian public placed high expectations on the Catholic Church, which, even during the communist era (1945–1990), served as a *guiding light* for the people.

Like most European countries, Croatia is currently facing a profound demographic crisis, characterized by severe depopulation and a long-term population decline (cf. Živić/Šimunić 2023). According to the latest census from 2021, Croatia has a population of 3,871,833. The majority of the population is comprised of Croats, with Catholics being the predominant religious group. The population breakdown is as follows: 91.63 % Croats, 3.20 % Serbs, 0.62 % Bosniaks, 0.46 % Roma, 0.36 % Italians, and 0.36 % Albanians. In terms of religious affiliation, Croatia is home to 78.97 % Catholics, 3.32 % Orthodox Christians, 1.32 % Muslims, 4.71 % atheists, and 1.72 % individuals who chose not to declare their religious affiliation (cf. Državni zavod za statistiku RH 2021).

2.1 Discovering the Social Teaching of the Church

With the fall of communism and the creation of the democratic state of Croatia, numerous issues pertaining to life in a democratic society emerged both for the Catholic Church and for theology in Croatia. The publication of the social encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (1991), as well as the *Year of the Social Teaching of the Church* proclaimed by Pope

John Paul II on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the first social encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, generated great interest in the Croatian ecclesiastical and social sphere. The encyclical *Centesimus Annus* which presents the Church's vision of society in the post-communist era, was also discussed in the civil media. Suddenly, the Social Teaching of the Church was *discovered* in Croatia and was seen as *potentially beneficial* to the development of the new Croatian society in the aftermath of the break with communism. This posed a considerable challenge for theologians, especially those who were immersed in ethical, moral, and social issues. Admittedly, some theologians had already addressed certain issues related to the Church's social documents after the Second Vatican Council, however the topic of the role and the place of Christians and the Church in the communist society had been deemed *undesirable* at the time². In Croatian theology of that period, and especially after the Council, other significant post-conciliar topics prevailed, while debates on ethical-social themes, similar to those in the German-speaking area or in Latin America, focusing on the *Church of the poor* and liberation theology, remained largely absent (cf. Baloban 2014).

With hindsight, as a witness of the time, I can assert that in the early 1990s, almost all doors in both the Church and in Croatian society *opened* to the application of the Social Teaching of the Church. The term itself was used in various contexts and on many occasions, appearing in the statutes and regulations of the newly formed associations of lay believers, as well as among political parties and trade unions. Yet, the fundamental problem was that the content and the meaning of the Social Teaching of the Church were not well understood. For some, it was a desirable and welcome concept that they *somehow* associated with the Church. For others, the Social Teaching of the Church was a *magical word*, while for some third groups, it represented a hollow phrase that was simply *to be used*.

Theologians who had engaged with social and ethical themes were invited to various symposia, both scientific and professional, and were often called upon to participate in discussions in the civil media. Debates with social

2 Communist ascent to power in 1945 halted the development of Catholic social thought since the beginning of the 20th century in Croatia. In the ensuing period (1945–1990), Catholic social thought virtually disappeared from the public sphere, and in Church life, it was reduced to individual courses taught at Church theological institutions and schools.

and humanistic scientists primarily revolved around the application of the Social Teaching of the Church in various areas of social life, such as business ethics, ethics in politics and media and demographic issues.

As indicated above, it is crucial to underscore that in the Croatian-speaking area, since the early 1990s, the term *Social Teaching of the Church* encompasses both practical and theoretical levels. The practical level pertains to the application of official social documents in the Church and social life. The theoretical level pertains to theological discussions on social and ethical issues from a Christian perspective. In other words, the term CSE is rarely used, and mostly in theological circles. In this context, the Catholic Faculty of Theology in the early 1990s, a new course was established under the name *Theological Social Ethics*. It will be interesting to observe the future developments in this respect.

3 CST/CSE seeking its place in both the Church and social life in Croatia

Reactions to a situation of a certain *openness* of the Croatian public to the impulses coming from the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church took two directions at that time. On the one hand, theologians, especially social ethicists and moral theologians, sought to contribute with their written and spoken word, as well as by giving meaning to the Social Teaching of the Church at theological institutions and schools, particularly at the Catholic Faculty of Theology of the University of Zagreb (hereafter: CFT in Zagreb). On the other hand, at the level of the Croatian Bishops' Conference (hereafter: CBC), the Centre for the Promotion of the Social Teaching of the Church (hereafter: the Centre) was established as an institution of the CBC, and officially opened on 5 March 1998 (cf. Baloban/Črpić/Kompes 2008), which would subsequently go on to become the driving force behind numerous activities related to the promotion of the Social Teaching of the Church in Croatia.

3.1 Social Teaching of the Church and theological social ethics at theological institutions and schools

The central theological institution of higher education in Croatia is the Catholic Faculty of Theology of the University of Zagreb, which was one

of the founding institutions of the modern Croatian university (1874) and continues to occupy a prominent place in the life of the University. In recent decades, theological faculties have been set up in Split (1999) within the University of Split, and in Đakovo (2005) within the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek. In addition, the High Theological School operates within the Redemptoris Mater Seminary in Pula, and the Philosophical and Theological Institute of the Society of Jesus in Zagreb serves as a private ecclesiastical school for seminarians. Given that the number of theology students has been consistently decreasing in Croatia, these theological institutions and schools educate a relatively small number of students, with the majority studying at the CFT in Zagreb, which has also seen a decline in the number of enrolments.

Thinking and doing CSE and the Social Teaching of the Church in Croatia are primarily associated with the CFT in Zagreb and its professors. However, the Social Teaching of the Church is taught and studied to a greater or lesser extent at other theological institutions and schools in Croatia, and some teachers have been exceptionally active in the deliberation and application of the Social Teaching of the Church.

At the CFT in Zagreb, courses dealing with social and ethical matters have been taught starting from the 1898/1899 academic year (cf. Baloban 2006, 115–118). Until 2000, these courses were given at the Chair in Moral Theology. The names of these courses are interesting, for example: social issues, sociology, principles of sociology, principles of Christian sociology, Catholic Social Teaching, Catholic sociology, etc. It can thus be deduced that in Croatia, until the 1970s, there had been a certain blend of terminology and content between sociology as a positive social science and the Social Teaching of the Church, which gradually developed into a theological discipline at the CFT. While that relationship had not been scientifically explored to date, the very fact that the term *sociology* was used for the Social Teaching of the Church (cf. Anderlić 1912)³ points to the existence of certain issues as well as opportunities for collaboration.⁴ From the 1980s onwards, the course titles no longer *alluded* to sociology, as the terms *Catholic Social Taught* and *Social Teaching of the Church* entered into use.

3 In 1912, theologian Vilko Anderlić published a textbook titled *Sociology* (cf. Anderlić 1912), which, in fact, dealt with the Social Teaching of the Church.

4 Following the 1990 democratic turnaround in Croatia, conditions were gradually created for possible interdisciplinary cooperation between sociology as a social science and the Social Teaching of the Church, offered by Croatian theologians.

The democratic changes after 1990, as well as the role of the Catholic Church and Christians, particularly Catholics, have prompted theological debates on the role and the place of courses addressing ethical and social issues at the CFT in Zagreb. As a result, the establishment of the Chair in the Social Teaching of the Church was initiated in 1994 and completed on 31 March 2000 (cf. Baloban 2006, 1019–1020). The new chair has not only reinforced the Social Teaching of the Church and CSE within Croatian theology, but it has also fostered interdisciplinary collaboration, particularly with the social sciences.

A unique aspect of Croatia's development of the Social Teaching of the Church and CSE since 1990 is that the approach relies both on the official social teaching of the Church and the content of social documents. Therefore, at the CFT two courses are presently entitled *Social Teaching of the Church*, exploring the official social teaching, its historical development, content, and context in which this teaching has gained an important place in both the Church-theological, and partly, the social reality of Croatia (cf. Baloban 2002, 76–80). A third course, *Theological Social Ethics*, strives to apply the Social Teaching of the Church in an interdisciplinary manner in the social and Church life in Croatia. The establishment of the Chair in the Social Teaching of the Church has propelled, on the one hand, greater interest in social issues among students, especially in the postgraduate specialist study *Ethical-Moral and Social Relevance of Theology and the Church*, taught at the CFT, as well as in postgraduate studies abroad. The majority of the candidates who earned their doctoral degrees in this specialization are currently active in Croatia. Moreover, the Chair in the Social Teaching of the Church has been involved in conducting specific projects⁵, including the interdisciplinary study program *Nonprofit Management and Social Advocacy* (cf. Plan i program poslijediplomskoga specijalističkog studija 2004)⁶, the first of its kind in Croatia.

5 Two scientific research projects, funded by the Ministry of Science, Education, and Sports of the Republic of Croatia, were conducted, gathering theologians, social ethicists, sociologists, political scientists and methodologists: Theological Foundation of Solidarity in Croatian Society (2002–2006) and Subsidiarity in Croatian Society, both directed by Stjepan Baloban.

6 The postgraduate specialist study program was conducted at the CFT in Zagreb, from 2004 to 2006, in collaboration with Caritas Croatia, and funded by the German government through Caritas Germany. Economists, sociologists, and political scientists from several Croatian universities were included in the organization and implementation of the study program.

3.2 The role and significance of the Centre for the Promotion of the Social Teaching of the Church

Everything is connected, as emphasized by Pope Francis (cf. 2015, 16) in his social encyclical *Laudato si': On Care for Our Common Home* in 2015. We could assert the same, albeit in a different context, when looking into the development of the Social Teaching of the Church and CSE in Croatia after 1990. The Centre for the Promotion of the Social Teaching of the Church (hereafter: the Centre) was founded by the Croatian Bishops' Conference, in an atmosphere conducive for the development of the Social Teaching of the Church, both within the Church and Croatian society. This institution, initially funded by *Renovabis* and later fully supported by the CBC, was able to undertake a variety of activities (cf. Baloban 2011). In this brief overview, it is not possible to provide a detailed account of the diverse activities of the Centre, which were well received by the Croatian Church and civil society. These activities were extensively documented in a book published on the occasion of the Centre's 10th anniversary (cf. Baloban/Črpić/Kompes 2008)⁷.

The Centre had been conceived by the theologian and social ethicist Stjepan Baloban, a professor at the CFT in Zagreb, who also served as the first director, while the first secretary was a young sociologist Gordan Črpić. From the beginning of its official operation in 1998, the Centre created conditions for interdisciplinary collaboration across a variety of activities carried out in partnership with the CFT and other Church and civil institutions.

Through its staff, the Centre participated in the implementation of several empirical research projects, most notably, in the international research study *European Values Study*, in Croatia coordinated by the CFT since 1998.

As an institution of the CBC, the Centre has been connected from the outset with theologians and social ethicists, and through various projects, it has engaged with other scientists who are keen to advance interdisciplinary collaboration.⁸

7 For more details on the activities of the Centre in its early years cf. Baloban 2002, 79–80.

8 An example of such collaboration is the poverty monitoring project conducted from 2002 to 2005 by the Centre in partnership with Croatian Caritas.

We should also highlight that many of the young theology students who had gathered around the Centre later specialized in social ethics, moral theology, and other scientific disciplines. Today, these young scholars are employed at several ecclesiastical and civil educational institutions in Croatia. One of such institutions is the Catholic University of Croatia, which began operating in 2010. The first secretary of the Centre, sociologist Gordan Črpić, played an exceptionally important role in the organization of this private Catholic university and currently serves as a professor of sociology and vice-rector. Social Teaching of the Church is taught for two hours at all five departments (history, psychology, sociology, communication studies, and nursing), as well as at the Faculty of Medicine of the Croatian Catholic University.

On 23 and 24 October 2023, the Centre celebrates its 25th anniversary (1998–2023) with an official ceremony and a two-day symposium *Promotion and Realization of the Social Teaching of the Church in Croatia*. This was an opportunity to analyse the work carried out thus far, and to join an interdisciplinary deliberation on the *Croatian model* of studying and promoting the Social Teaching of the Church.

4 In lieu of a conclusion

We hold that this panoramic country report on the evolution of Catholic social thought in Croatia, both in practical and theoretical terms, could only provide a brief overview of the main features of this development in the 20th century, with a particular emphasis on the last 30 years. We have focused on providing a narrative of events, rather than engrossing in theoretical debates, such as the relationship between the Social Teaching of the Church and theological social ethics, as it is known in Croatia. Indeed, these discussions are not currently prevalent in Croatian theological circles, which can be attributed to the waning interest in the Social Teaching of the Church, that has been taking place in both Croatian society and within the Church in recent years.

However, over the past 20 years, scientific research has shown a continuous decline in trust among Croatian citizens toward the Catholic Church. According to the 1999 *European Values Study*, 64% of Croatian citizens had trust in the Church; by 2008 this number had decreased to 53%, and in 2018, it further dropped to 38% (cf. Baloban/Črpić/Ježovita 2019). Taking into consideration that the subject matter of the Social

Teaching of the Church and CSE largely pertains to events within a specific society and the Church, which is a part of that society, the fact of a continuous decline in trust in the Church in Croatia is relevant for thinking and doing CSE.

Because of the limited scope of this work, it has not been possible to present the written scholarly contributions of Croatian theologians, especially social ethicists, on the topics we have addressed. The paper has set out to demonstrate the Croatian model of thinking and doing CSE, offering a concrete blueprint for the practical application of the Social Teaching of the Church in Croatia. This model boasts specific features that can be compared with the development of CSE in other countries and cultural contexts where Christians, members of the Catholic Church, live and work. In the time of profound changes, not only in relation to faith and religious communities but also in the way of life, CSE, or Social Teaching of the Church as it is known in Croatia, can serve as a reference point for encounters and discussions on the present and the future.

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