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DOI: 10.35765/pk.2022.3904.20

The Role of Empathy in the Church's Fraternal Dialog with the World in the Teaching of Pope Francis

STRESZCZENIE

This paper presents the value and role of empathy in the contemporary world. Sensitivity and empathy take crucial places in the pastoral activity of the Holy Catholic Church. Tenderness and compassion are important issues in Pope Francis' teaching. In papal understanding, Christian dialog involves sensitivity and empathy, which let one fulfill Christ's command to love one's neighbor. This article explores the idea of a Christian view on empathy and brotherhood referring to official papal documents. This topic is currently crucial due to increasing splits, aggression and individualism. The paper looks for an answer how empathetic should the Church approach to the world be and according to the Pope's teaching, how should the Church dialog profitably with people.

KEYWORDS: empathy, dialog, brotherhood, papal teaching, Pope Francis

STRESZCZENIE

Rola empatii w braterskim dialogu Kościoła ze światem w nauczaniu papieża Franciszka

Artykuł podejmuje kwestię wartości i roli empatii w dialogu, do którego szczególnie wezwani są chrześcijanie. Wrażliwość i umiejętność współodczuwania z odbiorcą eklezjalnego przepowiadania jest jednym z kluczowych elementów papieskiego nauczania. Zdolność do dialogu naznaczonego empatią wydaje się dla papieża Franciszka niezwykle istotną składową braterstwa, które jest realizacją ewangelicznego imperatywu wobec wspólnoty Kościoła. W niniejszym tekście została podjęta próba syntetycznego przedstawienia kluczowych dokumentów papieskich wzywających do braterskiego dialogu, który pozwala postawić opór fali indywidualizmu i budować mosty mimo różnic i podziałów.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: empatia, dialog, braterstwo, nauczanie papieskie, papież Franciszek

Suggested citation: Pierzchała, M. (2022). The role of empathy in the Church's fraternal dialog with the world in the teaching of Pope Francis. © ⓘ *Perspectives on Culture*, 4(39), pp. 299–312. DOI: 10.35765/pk.2022.3904.20.

Nadesłano: 13.06.2022

Zaakceptowano: 22.08.2022

Modern man has more and more goals to achieve and less and less time. In this age, people are living in a culture of permanent stress, constant rush and pressure to deserve by earning more and more money and gaining praise in the media space. As noted by Danish psychology professor Svend Brinkman, in such a reality, the only constancy to which a person can adapt is variability (Brinkmann, 2019). Even key values such as marriage, family or faith, for many have become accidental. In addition, the advancing wave of indifferentism and relativism creates a sense of alienation thus making people feel increasingly alone in their weaknesses. Empathy, readiness to help, and heartfelt compassion are among the scarcest attitudes longed for by so many today who are scarred by the crisis of fatherhood, the anthropological error, and the many other repercussions that have occurred in postmodern society. In the face of the above-mentioned phenomena, the “imagination of mercy” is so much needed to build a civilization of love (John Paul II, 2001, no. 50).

This article will seek answers to the questions about the meaning and role of empathy in the modern world, and especially in the community of the Church. The correlation between brotherhood and empathy will also be addressed. The attitude of brotherhood is highly desirable now, especially in the face of the multitude of divisions between people, but unfortunately it is also often misunderstood and defined. What kind of empathy is needed in the Church today, so that she can be fruitful in her pastoral activity?

1. The concept of empathy in psychology

Ever since Titchener’s introduction of the concept of empathy in 1909, there have been numerous attempts over the years to define the phenomenon (Kliś, 2012). It is proving to be an extremely interesting and multi-faceted issue, although commonly seen, but in its essence difficult to grasp and exhaustively explain. When it comes to empathy, an ability that is constitutive in partner relationships, one can find many concepts both on philosophical and psychological grounds dedicated to this subject. It is necessary to start by recalling Lipps’ use of the concept of *Einfühlung*, a feeling to describe the issue at hand. According to Lipps, *Einfühlung* is feeling along with someone, which gives us the ability to understand the spiritual world of values (Uchnast, 1996, pp. 37–52). Dithley, on the other hand, understood empathy as the ability to understand the experiences of others, which opens the way to the community of the spiritual world (Uchnast, 1996). Subsequently, there have been a variety of attempts to describe this issue, which we will not go into detail in this article. However, it is

important to note the differences between the colloquial understanding of empathy as sensitivity and sympathy and the distinct psychological terminology of sympathy, commiseration, antipathy and empathy (Kliś & Kossewska, 2000).

Mentioning the variety of concepts and definitions of empathy, it should be acknowledged that the ability to empathize with the emotions of another person is an extremely helpful trait for building interpersonal and social relationships. In psychology, empathy is referred to as the ability to receive and interpret another person's feelings and correspond with them (Eisenberg, 2005). Hence, psychologists distinguish different components of empathy, among others, the cognitive one, which allows one to read and understand the emotions of another person, and the affective one, which allows one to receive the feelings of the other and respond to them (Eisenberg, 2005).

Cognitive empathy allows a person to see the world from the perspective of another, which greatly expands his or her own previous point of view and can lead to an attitude of openness and attentiveness that enables one to see the rich diversity of human individuals with their views (Breczko, 2014). Affective empathy allows one to penetrate the feelings of another person and respond to them in both a negative and positive key, taking an attitude of indifference and hostility or kindness and support (Breczko, 2014). Fortunately, to date, most reports indicate a positive correlation between emotional sensitivity and personalistic as well as altruistic behavior (Kliś, 2012). Nevertheless, it should be noted that the ability to empathize can be used for the loftiest purposes, as well as, unfortunately, it can be a unifying force in hateful, destructive acts, as exemplified by ideologies that destroy the dignity of the human person.

The concept of empathy as an existential attitude (Uchnast, 1996), which has inspired and stimulated the development of numerous studies on the role of empathy in family and social terms is noteworthy (Kliś, 2015). Professor Uchnast notes that, in order to creatively and nobly to employ the capability to empathize, one needs to understand it as Dithley did. He signals that it also seems necessary to refer to the phenomenological understanding of empathy in the work of Thomas Aquinas, Edith Stein, as well as Binswanger's existential account of empathy. Looking at empathy as an existential attitude makes it possible to isolate its subjective function in man. Man has the ability, as a person, to accept stimuli coming from the environment with sensitivity, respond to them and adapt to them in some way in the dimension of his action. It should be noted that empathy is made visible in interpersonal relationships through emotional sensitivity, understanding cognition and synergistic behavior (Uchnast, 1996). Sensitivity is necessary not only to perceive the emotional states of

the other, but also to participate in them with a readiness to help in their hardships. Sensitivity experienced in this way enables the development of cognition that understands and accepts the experiences and states of others without pressure to change or suppress them. Finally, the two stages mentioned above lead to synergistic behavior, which allows one to interact with the other and create opportunities for him or her to act according to needs and resources. This enables authentic openness in meeting people and facing reality, which becomes an opportunity to get to know and understand each other and establishing deep partnerships.

It is worth mentioning that also in the field of psychotherapy, the role of empathy has been recognized and appreciated as extremely important in the relationship between the therapist and patient; many contemporary psychologists and psychotherapists have written more extensively about this phenomenon and confirm it (Rogers, 1975; Rembowski, 1982). Rogers argued that we should see empathy as the ability not only to feel the states of another person but one to establish and maintain relationships (Dolliver, 1995). In the therapeutic process, relationship is the essence and starting point on the road to healing. However, just as an interpersonal relationship establishes and develops over time, so is the level of empathy related to the degree of experiencing closeness to another person. It is worth mentioning that empathy proves to be extremely helpful in building and experiencing marital and family relationships, especially in resolving conflicts within families (Kliś, 2015). Also noteworthy is the fact that empathy can have an important function in the prevention and treatment of burnout syndrome, which was confirmed by the results of a study (Kliś & Kossewska, 2000).

2. The role of empathy in the pastoral activity of the Church

Referring to the results of philosophical or psychological research, we can say without a shadow of a doubt that empathy has not one name. Understood as an existential attitude, as discussed in more detail in the previous paragraph, it also plays a significant role in the pastoral activity of the Church, which should include a great deal of openness and readiness to listen to people's needs and messages. It is needed for both believers and non-believers, since God does not want "anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (cf. 2 Peter 3: 9). Therefore, ministry should serve the reception of salvation by every person, who is the way of the Church, as St. John Paul II provided (John Paul II, 1979).

It is the mission of the Church to steadily examine, read and interpret the signs of the times, in order to proclaim the Gospel even better (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 4). Certainly, the signs of the times are growing haste, materialism and hedonism coupled with it, but also the tremendous progress of science and technology, globalization, mobility and the ease of contacting other people via instant messaging and social networks. These media have been the only form of participation in religious practices for many in the pandemic time, however, this raises some concern about getting used to, “online Masses” or equating online participation with real participation in the Eucharist. That is why the Pope warns us that

digital media can put people at risk of addiction, isolation and progressive loss of contact with reality, hindering the development of authentic human relationships. There is a need for physical gestures, facial expressions, silence, body language, and even smell, trembling of hands, blushing and sweating, because it all speaks and belongs to human communication. Virtual contacts do not truly build the ‘us’ but they tend to mask and reinforce individualism (Francis, 2020a, p. 43).

Although it is possible to observe a plurality of communication opportunities that allow people to stay in constant contact with each other despite geographical distance, so many people suffer from loneliness, depression, broken families, in addition to a lack of true friendships and willingness to support each other in difficult moments. Hence, Holy Father Francis expressed his desire to appreciate the value of empathy and fraternity:

how wonderful it would be if the development of scientific and technological innovations was also accompanied by increased equity and social inclusion! How wonderful it would be to rediscover the needs of the brother and sister in my orbit while discovering new distant planets (Francis, 2020a, p. 31).

Also, Simon Baron-Cohen portrays empathy as one of the most valuable human abilities enabling individuals to coexist prospectively in society (Baron-Cohen, 2014, p. 139).

The role of the Church is to bear witness to a truly fraternal life, in which, one “carries each other’s burdens” (cf. Galatians 6: 2). Clearly, the creation of communion and its development is fraught with considerable difficulty and the need for a collective search for new, common ways. For this reason, numerous calls for this important task can be found in the teaching of Pope Francis. For example, in the apostolic letter *Patris Corde* addressed to the faithful on the occasion of the year of St. Joseph,

the Bishop of Rome encouraged believers not to be afraid to face adversity and to seek creative solutions. An inexhaustible treasury of creative pastoral action is the assistance of the Holy Spirit revealed in the *sensus fidei* of God's people. In *Patris Corde* the Pope reminded that "God always finds a way to save us, provided we show the same creative courage as the carpenter of Nazareth, who was able to turn a problem into a possibility by trusting always in divine providence" (Francis, 2020b, p. 5). In the face of the current problems facing the individual, family and society today, no one else but the Church should lead the way and set an example of unity, brotherhood and openness, going out into the world with creative courage in various evangelization efforts.

There is a need for a prudent and courageous pastoral offensive against the culture of self-fulfillment and self-sufficiency promoted on the front pages of newspapers and across social networks today, which results in the creation of exclusive relationships and groups, which seems like an easier form of existence to many at first glance. Meanwhile, this artificial interpersonal enclave is bereft of by the gift of reciprocity and diversity of persons and attitudes that could spawn authentic and creative dialog. The temptation of exclusivity does not bypass church or lay communities, which is why the Holy Father reminds us that the Word of God invites us to love toward every person, "they are strangers to you" (cf. 3 John 5) During a meeting with those assisted by charitable church works in Tallinn, Francis argued that "love breaks the chains that isolate and separate us and throws over bridges; love allows us to build a large family in which we can all feel at home. Love has a taste of compassion and dignity" (Francis, 2018b). Pope Francis has noted many times that there is a need for compassion and attentiveness not only though primarily to God, but also to other people, to nature or history, or art.

It has to be said that a concerted search for the truth is a more difficult path than passing ordinances from behind a desk, pulpit or camera. Meanwhile, the hunger for empathy, closeness and sincere dialogue concerns an ever-widening circle of relationships in marriage, family, pastoral, politics, labor, education and social life, among others. Perhaps sometimes the communal search for truth is abandoned because of the immaturity of the parties or because of a fear of another point of view, difference of opinion or conflict?

Meanwhile, the search for truth, as the history of philosophy and theology shows, also presupposes stages of crisis, silence, hardship and error. Of course, this common search for truth can never lead to a compromise adjustment of the norms of faith or morality to the demands of the world. However, not infrequently much depends on the way of communicating and the intention of the parties. This is why empathy is a priceless

competency in the building of bonds of fraternity, for a number of reasons. Firstly, because it creates a favorable climate for the exchange of ideas and insights. Secondly, an empathetic attitude is not an imposition of the message sender's world view on the receiver, even if they are different, empathy allows one to listen to the other, which relieves the risk of unnecessary quarrels and closure to meet otherness and novelty (Dziewiecki, 2002). It should be emphasized that the task of the Church is to preach the message of the Gospel without diluting its essence, but preaching the Gospel can never be devoid of compassion, mercy and respect for every person encountered.

3. Empathic listening as a *sine qua non* of any dialogue

Pope Francis has drawn the attention of the recipients of his latest encyclical to the need to listen and be attentive to their neighbors. In *Fratelli tutti* one can find the following papal intuition expressed in the words:

The ability to sit down and listen to others, typical of interpersonal encounters, is paradigmatic of the welcoming attitude shown by those who transcend narcissism and accept others, caring for them and welcoming them into their lives. Yet today's world is largely a deaf world... At times, the frantic pace of the modern world prevents us from listening attentively to what another person is saying. Halfway through, we interrupt him and want to contradict what he has not even finished saying (Francis, 2020a, p. 48).

Listening expresses respect and openness to the diversity of human beings with their sensitivities, world views and attitudes. In today's world, spending time together with an attitude of attentive listening to each other, empathic care and readiness to solve problems in a synergistic way is a much more desirable commodity than material support.

Holy Father Francis has underlined the urgency for the young to be heard many times in his teaching, as youth is looking for warmth and acceptance in the digital continent, and looking for validation in the number of followers and likes under their photos and posts. Especially in the time of the pandemic Youtubers and Instagrammers became more of idols for many young people. However, online friendships will never replace real relationships, everyday support and the affirming looks of parents, priests, teachers of religion and teachers in general.

In the face of this, the Church is standing before a great opportunity to share the worth of experiencing the deep relationships with God and one's

neighbors. This is why youth communities and parish groups may come up with initiatives inviting participation in small religious meetings which can become a perfect school of mutual listening and expressing oneself. It is absolutely necessary for the Church not only to act defensively, apologetically, but also to initiate and offer various proposals for religious formation. In today's world of technocracy, above all there is a need for specialized pastoral care with prudent and ready-to-listen priests and leaders. This would be a beautiful example of protesting against the amoral attitudes of celebrities promoted by the media, the depreciation of Christian personalism, and the growing acquiescence to hate, the consequences of which, especially among young people, cause deep emotional wounds and even suicide attempts (Kukliński, 2018).

In the *Christus vivit* Adhortation, the Pope teaches that the faithful of the Church need to have Christlike openness and readiness of empathic listening.

Rather than listening to young people attentively, all too often, there is a tendency to provide prepackaged answers and ready-made solutions, without allowing their real questions to emerge and facing the challenges they pose. Yet once the Church sets aside narrow preconceptions and listens carefully to the young, this empathy enriches her, for it allows young people to make their own contribution to the community, helping it to appreciate new sensitivities and to consider new questions (Francis, 2019, p. 65).

An empathic attitude and readiness to listen to every person creates priceless possibilities for dialog, and if it is well managed, especially on the side of the Church, it may yield the fruits of truly brotherly communion. Of course, it takes two to tango, therefore, empathy and openness on one side will not suffice to create dialog. However, even when distance or hostility can be felt in an encounter with the other, it is always worthwhile to be characterized by readiness to talk and meet, since the kindness of one party can trigger the same seemingly latent desire for dialogue in the other. That is why the Pope calls for going to the periphery and bearing witness to Christ's love. In *Fratelli tutti*, Francis invites: "Together, we can seek the truth in dialog, in relaxed conversation or in passionate debate. To do so calls for perseverance; it entails moments of silence and suffering, yet it can patiently embrace the broader experience of individuals and peoples" (Francis, 2020a, p. 50). Further, he teaches that "As silence and careful listening disappear, replaced by a frenzy of texting, this basic structure of sage human communication is at risk. A new lifestyle is emerging, where we create only what we want and exclude all that we cannot control or know instantly and superficially" (Francis, 2020a, p. 49).

4. Towards fraternal dialog

As can be seen, the topic of openness and fraternity finds a prominent place in numerous theological discussions and writings today, a notable confirmation of which is the publication of Holy Father Francis' encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*. In it, the author points out that openness and going out towards the other is the attitude that heals humanity from extreme individualism (Francis, 2020a, p. 48). The model and reference point for the attitudes of Christians is the brotherhood of Jesus, expressed in service and readiness to seek out the lost and beleaguered. Christ's merciful love never ceases in dialog with people affected by weaknesses and the consequences of sins. It is worth noting that the Christian openness and fraternity called for by the Pope are, in their assumptions, quite different attitudes from the ideological concepts of pseudo-fraternity and alleged respect for the dignity of individuals or groups propagated in the mass media. They are an aftermath of post-Enlightenment and Marxist paradigms, and thus actually erode the authentic openness and willingness to dialog that are evangelical hallmarks.

Today's human being, living in the era of the SARS-CoV2 virus pandemic as well as the epidemic of atheism, secularization and de-Christianization (John Paul II, 1993, no. 106) is looking for a community that would be a safe harbor where he or she could experience empathy and acceptance in order to rediscover the meaning and purpose of life, and thus look with hope to the future. The obvious response seems to be that the Church, as the community of Christ's disciples *par excellence*, should be a welcoming home where everyone can experience the kerygma embodied in the lives of Christians. The Holy Father John Paul II, as he ushered Christians into the new millennium, urged them to "make the Church the home and the school of communion: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings" (John Paul II, 2001, p. 43).

Then the same Pope noted in the Post-Synodal *Ecclesia in Europa* Apostolic Exhortation, that "the loss of Europe's Christian memory and heritage, accompanied by a kind of practical agnosticism and religious indifference whereby many Europeans give the impression of living without spiritual roots and somewhat like heirs who have squandered a patrimony entrusted to them by history" (John Paul II, 2003, no. 7). Atheism and progressive secularization are trying to suppress all religious needs of man, and thus negate the relational identity of human existence (Muller, 2015, p. 143). The digitization and modernization of many areas of life, which can be seen at every turn, would seem to indicate an improvement in the quality of life of Europeans, and yet it is impossible not to notice the

acceleration of the incidence of mental disorders, psychosomatic diseases, depression and even suicide, unfortunately, also among young people.

Does mental suffering arise *ex nihilo*, with no connection to the reduction of relational identity and the desire to harmonize with God's personal love for man? If a person is guided only by the logic of self-actualization which excludes reference to God and the other person then he or she turns out to be an empty self, which, according to the American psychologist Cushman, results in lowered self-esteem, addictions, obsessive-compulsive disorders, axiological and spiritual confusion and many other issues (Cushman, 1990) some of the pathologies that plague it, and the technologies that attempt to heal it. Of particular interest is the historical shift from the Victorian, sexually restricted self to the post-World War II empty self. The empty self is soothed and made cohesive by becoming "filled up" with food, consumer products, and celebrities. Its historical antecedents, economic constituents, and political consequences are the focus of this article. The two professions most responsible for healing the empty self, advertising and psychotherapy, find themselves in a bind: They must treat a psychological symptom without being able to address its historical causes. Both circumvent the bind by employing the life-style solution, a strategy that attempts to heal by covertly filling the empty self with the accoutrements, values, and mannerisms of idealized figures. This strategy solves an old problem but creates new ones, including an opportunity for abuse by exploitive therapists, cult leaders, and politicians. Psychology's role in constructing the empty self, and thus reproducing the current hierarchy of power and privilege, is examined. (PsycINFO Database Record (c. There is no escaping the truth that the human person is the image of God the Creator, and therefore also a mystery, the explanation of which man receives in relation to Him (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 51) hence if man rejects the love of God, he will lose the ability to understand himself, as well as to determine the existential reference points and awareness of the eschatological purpose of his life.

Despite all the phenomena mentioned above, there is all the more need for empathy, patience and mercy towards brothers and sisters in the world to enable them to rediscover the Gospel as the source that constitutes human identity. Every person in the depths of his or her heart longs for a strong anchor of the soul – hope (cf. Hebrews 6: 8–19). The lack of this virtue deprives a person of the will to live and causes him or her to succumb to spiritual apathy and acedia. Therefore, the role and mission of the Church as a community proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ not only does not lose its validity, but, reading the signs of the times, should bear witness to hope and love. Pope Francis in an address at an ecumenical

meeting in Riga, recalled that the source of the identity and mission of the People of God is the Gospel of Christ, which he expressed in the words:

If the music of the Gospel ceases to resound within us, we will lose the joy that comes from compassion, the tenderness born of trust, the capacity for reconciliation, rooted in the awareness that we are always those who are forgiven and sent. If the music of the Gospel stops resounding in our homes, in our squares, in our workplaces, in politics and in the economy, we will stifle the melody that stirred us to fight for the dignity of every human being (Francis, 2018a).

Therefore, it is necessary to constantly seek forms that enable fraternal dialog with modern man, so that he can, hearing the Gospel music, discover human value and dignity in Christ and His Church.

Conclusion

Given the threats and challenges of the present time outlined in the article, it is not difficult to see the need for an empathetic dialog between the Church and the world, and therefore between Christians and their brothers and sisters, whether believers, seekers or declared atheists. In the face of strong polarizations in societies, the longing for dialog that is not characterized by either proselytizing or depreciating Christian doctrine is becoming apparent. The need for creative evangelization dialog based not only on words, but first and foremost on deeds according to the maxim: *verba docent, exempla trahunt*.

It is worth mentioning St. Pope Paul VI's last speech at the Second Vatican Council, in which he taught that the heart of the Council's spirituality turned out to be contained precisely the parable of the Merciful Samaritan (Paul VI, 1965). It is in this Luke parable that Christ specifically calls on his listeners to change their mentality on the issues of human interrelationships. Jesus encourages his interlocutor not to ask "And who is my neighbor?" but to consider for whom he can become a brother. Throughout history, Christians have found numerous answers to the evoked question through activities for the poor and excluded, creating spaces of support and development for the sick, disabled, afflicted and creating hospices. It is also important to notice personal role models, especially saints such as Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Brother Albert Chmielowski and Blessed Mother Rose Czacka, who not only accepted and fulfilled the indications of the Good Samaritan parable, but became appealing examples for so many people.

It is precisely such a change of thinking, born as the fruit of the Holy Spirit's action in the hearts of Church pastors and the faithful, that is the power to seek new ways to reach out to man amid the changing turns of history and the fate of the world. With openness to the assistance of the Holy Spirit and obedience to His inspirations, it can be said with confidence that *Ecclesia semper reformanda est*. Therefore, the current time of challenges of the 21st century is also an invitation to the necessary reform of structures and, above all, references of the Church community *ad intra* and *ad extra*. Instead of the mass pastoralism of the past, which may have been taken away irretrievably with the covid wind, what is needed is a renewal in dialog and pastoral communication based on a more empathetic and personalistic approach to each sheep of the Good Shepherd. Empathy, readiness to listen, attentiveness and sensitivity to the other are certainly constitutive hallmarks of fraternity, which is the touchstone of the authenticity of Christians who let themselves be known by how much they love each other (cf. John 13: 34–35).

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