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METODA *VIA ASCENDENS* I JEJ ZNACZENIE
W BADANIACH EKLEZJOLOGICZNYCH
NA PRZYKŁADZIE AMERYKI ŁACIŃSKIEJ

THE *VIA ASCENDENS* METHOD AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE
FOR ECCLESIOLOGICAL STUDIES.
A LATIN AMERICAN CASE STUDY

Abstract. The article discusses the issue of research methodology in the field of fundamental ecclesiology. The author draws attention to the importance and need to update the *via ascendens* method, especially its variants, which examine aspects of the life of the Church. Taking Latin America as an example, he analyses five selected aspects of the Church's life from within in relation to ecumenism and non-Christian religions, to religiously indifferent and atheism, and in relation to issues concerning social life and culture. By using SWOT heuristic tools, he discusses their exemplary strong and weak aspects, including opportunities and threats. In the last part, taking into account the Latin American ecclesial experience, the author, first, indicates the need to broaden the subject of fundamental theology concerning the problem of the unfulfilled expectations of those who leave the Church. Next, he stresses the importance of carrying out the mission as the source and purpose of theological research. Finally, he draws attention to the fact, that there are important questions in theology, which concern different social groups.

Key words: fundamental theology; ecclesiology; methodology; Latin America.

According to Cardinal Stanislaw Nagy, co-founder of the Lublin School of Fundamental Theology, the complex reality of the Church requires using a variety of research tools. One of the methods that he referred to is the *via ascendens*, which includes an analysis of the expressions of the Church's

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life.¹ In different variations, this method has been applied to ancient and contemporary Church documents and the work of theologians. From the point of view of fundamental theology, its usefulness is related to the function of Christian witness, both individual and community, in shaping the credibility of Revelation and the Church. This method's general assumptions are still applicable today. It can still be a methodologically fruitful tool for conducting inspiring and revealing research in fundamental theology.

However, the mentioned method requires renewed reflection. In addition to recent developments in understanding the *depositum fidei*, we need to take into consideration the current social-cultural context and contemporary scientific achievements. One of the possible paths of this renewal is the method known as see-judge-act. It was established in Europe in the context of the crisis of Christian credibility. Its origins are also linked to the Catholic intellectual trends of the late nineteenth century (e.g. L. Ollé-Laprune) and the initiatives of J. Cardijn. The see-judge-act method is often referred to as one of the ways man exists in reality. The real man and questions that are of concern to him are found at its core. It is based on a natural and almost spontaneous tendency to perceive, interpret and draw conclusions. It very deeply creates meaning in life, because it helps to discover the relationship between actual experiences and Revelation and points to its credibility. Compared to deductive systems, which often require refined skills and are difficult to implement, inductive reasoning is an important characteristic and this method's strong point. To see-judge-act, although not without limitations, overcomes the deficiencies of top-down methodology.² In the second half of the twentieth century in Latin America, this method has found widespread use thanks to the support of the papacy and the bishops of Latin America (Medellín, Puebla, Aparecida), and indirectly, the Second Vatican Council.

Therefore, this article is an attempt to analyze the Church's life based on Latin America. It should be noted that this is not a comprehensive catalog of all possible issues. Here the goal is modest: to illustrate how analyzing the Church's life can offer various issues for fundamental theology and make it more dynamic and beneficial for its readers. In order to realize such a project, I have selected five areas: 1. The Church from within; 2. The Church in relation to ecumenism; 3. The Church in relation to non-Christian religions,

¹ S. NAGY, *Chrystus w Kościele. Zarys eklezjologii fundamentalnej*, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Wrocławskiej Księgarni Archidiecezjalnej 1982, p. 9-15.

² Cf. A. MARECHAL, *Toda nuestra vida en el Evangelio a través de la revisión de vida*, Barcelona 1966, p. 39-330; J.A. DELGADO DE LA ROSA, *En el corazón de la JOC*, Valencia 2001, p. 32-39.

religious indifferentism and atheism; 4. The Church in relation to social life problems; and 5. The Church in relation to culture and cultural trends. By using the SWOT heuristic tool, I will point to the strengths and weaknesses of the ecclesial communities, including their opportunities and threats in each of these areas. The last part will present some consequences of this kind of research for fundamental theology. This study is a variation of conjuncture analysis (a combination of circumstances or events), which Catholic leaders in Latin America devote much attention to.³

I. STRENGTHS

1. The Church in Latin America is fascinating not only because of its great numbers (most modern Catholics live in Latin America), but also its dynamic life. It is a Church with a rich 500-year-old history and its contribution to Latin America, though sometimes controversial, is undisputed. In this Church today, the model of the functioning of leaders and ecclesial communities – from small communities to parishes, dioceses, national and supranational institutions – is noteworthy. It is the model that describes such categories as: unity, participation, collegiality, assistance, subsidiarity, brotherhood, equality and autonomy. The visible consequence of a unilateral correction of the top-down model is evangelical activation of leaders, especially the laity, and the dynamization of various communities and institutions. Their invol-

³This article is based on my earlier work, i.e. *Apologia Kościoła we współczesnej Ameryce Łacińskiej*, in: *Apologia Kościoła dziś*, ed. F. Krauze, P. Rabczyński (Biblioteka Teologii Fundamentalnej 7), Gdańsk–Olsztyn–Bydgoszcz 2012, p. 61-77, and *Modele ewangelizacji kultur i inkulturacji wiary w teologii latynoamerykańskiej*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL 2013; *Opcja na rzecz ubogich znakiem wiarygodności Kościoła*, Pieniężno 2002; *Kościół katolicki wobec urbanizacji w Ameryce Łacińskiej*, in: *Pluralizm religijny i kulturowy współczesnego świata. Księga pamiątkowa dedykowana Księdzu Profesorowi Henrykowi Zimoniowi SVD w 70. rocznicę urodzin*, ed. Z. Kupisiński, S. Grodz, Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL 2010, p. 235-245; *Ameryka Łacińska u progu XXI w. wg Alberta Methola Ferrégo*, in: *Oblicza Ameryki Łacińskiej*, ed. K. Krzywicka and J. Kaczyńska, Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 2010, p. 13-23; „Złoty wiek” *Kościola w Ameryce Łacińskiej*, in: *Dzieje kultury latynoamerykańskiej*, ed. M.F. Gawrycki, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN 2009, p. 221-233; *Chrześcijaństwo a kultury w Ameryce Łacińskiej*, „Studia Nauk Teologicznych PAN” 2010, vol. 5, p. 89-102; *Duchowni katolicycy wobec emancypacji politycznej Ameryki Łacińskiej w XIX wieku*, in: *Dwieście lat niepodległości Ameryki Łacińskiej. Perspektywa historyczna i wyzwania współczesności*, ed. K. Krzywicka, Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 2012, p. 165-179; *Krytyka korporacji transnarodowych w środowiskach chrześcijańskich w Ameryce Łacińskiej*, in: *Polska, Europa, świat. Korporacje transnarodowe*, ed. T. Guz, K.A. Kłosiński, P. Marzec, Lublin–Tomaszów Lubelski 2007, p. 195-209.

vement in ecclesial life is not just a wish, repeated in official narratives and documents, but has resulted in the creation of a proper and real space for working in parishes, dioceses and Church institutions. This dynamization would not be possible without conciliar renewal and papal teachings, the accumulated experiences in Latin American history and applying the achievements of the humanities. Therefore, we can say that this is the Church renewed in the findings of the Second Vatican Council and contemporary teaching of the Magisterium of the Church, meticulously implemented by the active the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM), the National Bishops Conferences supported by the Pontifical Commission for Latin America (CAL) and other institutions (eg. Confederación Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Religiosos y Religiosas – CLAR).

Also noteworthy is the inculturation dialogue with traditional and modern cultures and the achievements of civilization. The Church in Latin America is also impressive in its community model of Christian life in parishes and dioceses, understood as the community of communities. For us, it emerges as a paradigm in the implementation of friendly ecclesial life, which is cordial, warm, inviting, inclusive, and whose hierarchy is usually close to people and their problems. The religious life is also a strong point, especially communities living in the so-called insertion. CLAR is very active. Another strong point of the Church in Latin America is its involvement in school education at various levels, including higher education. Their theology is also remarkable, which courageously undertakes Latin American topics, thus serving the Church and raising the cultural life of Catholics. It is a Church focused on fulfilling the mission of evangelization in parishes and situations in which the Christian faith is disappearing, especially in so-called border situations. It is characterized by the *ad gentes* involvement, although this is small compared to the number of Catholics.⁴

2. In relation to other Christian denominations, the advantage of the Church in Latin America is the attitude of respect, tolerance and dialogue, far from proselytizing and inciting hostility towards other believers. This is an important matter, because some communities arising from the Protestant tradition are aggressive towards Catholics and other religions. Ecumenism has become a prerequisite for Catholics fulfilling their mission. Therefore, the national Episcopates and CELAM have designated special agendas for ecu-

⁴ A. MENTHOL FERRE, *De Río a Puebla. Etapas históricas de la Iglesia en América Latina (1945-1980)*, Bogotá 1980; R. MUÑOZ, *Nova concência da Igreja na América Latina*, Petrópolis 1979.

menism. One of their tasks involves promoting the identity of the Christian and Catholic principles of ecumenism and activities that would facilitate Christian unity and a common witness to Jesus Christ. They do not carry out advanced theological disputes. The cooperation – essentially among the so-called historical Churches – is visible in their mutual respect of baptism, Biblical studies and in pro-social actions.⁵

3. Past and present migrations of people have caused that, apart from the followers of Indian religions and Christians (essentially from the Euro-Atlantic world), today, Latin America is inhabited by the followers of traditional African religions, Judaism, Islam, Bahá'í, Hinduism, Buddhism and Shinto. There are also groups associated with Spiritism, theosophy and esotericism. The advantage of the Catholic Church is its attitude towards these religions, religiously indifferent people and atheists. Despite the dominant position the Church received as a result of 500 years of evangelization, just as in the case of ecumenism, the Church promotes an attitude of respect, tolerance and dialogue. There are no missionary activities carried out in relation to other believers or non-believers, as was the case in the past. Rather, the emphasis is placed on the personal witness of Catholics and ecclesial communities, and the attitude of peaceful coexistence. We must also note changing attitudes towards Indians and Afro-Latin Americans. Under the influence of post-conciliar missiology, and especially the anthropologists' conference in Barbados in 1971, in recent decades, activity is mostly limited to being among Indians, defending their rights and humanitarian aid. Certain efforts are also being made towards inculturation of the faith in the world of Indian cultures and Afro-Latin Americans. This problem is undertaken by special episcopal agencies, research institutes, and especially those associated with the project on Indian and Afro-Latin American theology.⁶

4. The strengths of the Catholic Church include its presence in social life and testimony on social issues. In addition to providing traditional formation, it also acts as a critic of pathology, pointing to the need for personal and structural conversion. The Church is also a promoter of social dialogue.

⁵ V Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe. Aparecida, Brasil, mayo 2007. *Documento Conclusivo. Discípulos y Misioneros de Jesucristo para que nuestros pueblos en Él tengan vida "Yo soy el Camino, la Verdad y la Vida" (Jn 16,4)*. Bogotá: Centro de Publicaciones del CELAM 2007 227-234 (ApC); F. SAMPIETRO NIETO, *Manual de ecumenismo. Iglesias cristianas y pastoral ecuménica*, Santiago: CM, Ed. Paulinas 1988; E. WOLFF, *O ecumenismo no Brasil. Uma introdução ao pensamento ecumênico da CNBB*, São Paulo 2004, p. 53-118.

⁶ E. LÓPEZ HERNÁNDEZ, *Teología india. Antología*, Cochabamba: UCB, Editorial Guadalupe, Verbo Divino 2000, p. 7-9.

In recent decades, thanks to the courageous attitude of the Catholic laity, clergy and theologians (including liberation theologians), the Church has contributed to the democratization of life and better prospects for the Latin American community, especially the poor. Communities and Catholic movements have formed a large number of leaders. Some of them became leaders of human rights movements and democratic opposition. Many of them have suffered persecution or lost their lives, hence the Church in Latin America has many contemporary witnesses and martyrs for the faith.⁷

5. Strengths are also present in relations between the Church and culture. Catholics have co-created them over the past five centuries, and their participation in cultural-forming processes is particularly evident today. However, nowadays, a typical Latin American is a kind of cultural broker, who must make choices among a myriad of values, behavior patterns, symbols and rituals. Today's proposals give much to choose from: modern cultures in urban agglomerations and the world of media, traditional Indian cultures and African traditional cultures, cultural elites, modern and postmodern trends, liberalism, etc. In this regard, the Church acts as the evangelizer of cultures. Being critical, it fulfills the role of a midwife in anticipation of the so-called upcoming culture, which was mentioned at a conference in Santo Domingo (1992).

II. WEAKNESSES

1. This impressive Church also has weaknesses. They do not stem from its being essentially the Church of Christ, but are due to the frailty of its members and the complex situation in which the Christian communities accomplish their goal and tasks. Weaknesses related to this essential internal conflict raise the question: how can one be a Christian and how to succeed in one's personal, family, social and ecclesial life in Latin America? An analysis of the disputes that arise around this issue proves that misunderstandings, first of all, do not involve the issue of so-called ecclesial orthodoxy and discipline. They come from a variety of proposals for action and hermeneutics of ecclesial life and the contemporary times. In this context, one usually hears about the problem of theological and pastoral mentality, rejection or selective acceptance of the Second Vatican Council and contemporary cultures as possible areas of inculturation. The Church in Latin America also has the

⁷ Cf. L. BOFF, *O caminhar da Igreja com os opromidos*, Rio de Janeiro 1980.

largest group of passive viewers of these tensions and customers of different pastoral offers. They live the Catholic faith, such as in the past, or one modified and managed by popular religiosity, movements and small communities. The issue of the diversity of worldview and ideology is significant, as well as the phenomenon of transferring these differences onto the ecclesial and doctrinal life.⁸

2. As for the weaknesses of the Church in relation to other Christian communities, it is surprising how easily it got rid of – depending on the country – up to a third of its members. This is a significant fact, which proves not only the existence of pastoral deficiencies, but also weak bonds of faith, lack of responsibility for our brothers in the faith, individualism, indifference and negligence. This is probably a symptom of doctrinal ambiguity in presenting the Catholic faith; the existence of various difficulties among Catholic leaders; keeping a distance from the real problems of the members of ecclesial communities; pettiness; clientelism and corporatism; burdensome structures and activities, etc.⁹

3. In relation to other religions, we should mention two examples of weaknesses. They exhibit a breach in the formation of Catholics, especially the so-called *agentes de pastoral* – people involved in evangelism or aspiring to the role of protagonists of ecclesial and social life. In the Church of Latin American, there is a group of people dedicated to the Church who cannot see or even unduly restricts the possibility of inculturation with the world of cultures and the religions of Indians and descendants of African slaves. Cultural and traditional ancestor religions are seen by some as a sign of demonic activity, a lack of culture or the work of people of ill will. The solution is seen only in the acceptance of cultural and religious evangelizers as the only and correct forms of faith. In the second group are those who emphasize the need for renewal of cultures and religions through inculturation, without having to completely replace them. However, this group includes proposals for uncritical and even naive syncretism.¹⁰

4. As for social life, the weakness of the Catholic Church is present when we answer the question: what role should Catholic communities perform in

⁸ J. SOBRINO, *Comunión, conflicto y solidaridad eclesial*, in: *Misterium liberationis. Conceptos fundamentales de la Teología de la Liberation*, vol. II, ed. I. Ellacura, J. Sobrino, Madrid: Editorial Trotta 1990, p. 217-243.

⁹ F. GALINDO, *El protestantismo fundamentalista: una experiencia ambigua para América Latina*, Estella: Verbo Divino 1992, p. 124-346.

¹⁰ J. GORSKI, *Las „semillas de Verbo” origen, olvido y redescubrimiento de un concepto*, “Anuario de la Academia Boliviana de Historia Eclesiástica” 2002, p. 201-224.

social life? Here we should add yet another issue essential for understanding the problems of Latin America: what type of Catholicism is favored by the centers of real power and by the group aspiring to the role of social life actors? These are not rhetorical questions, but translate into visible attitudes, interpretations and actions. In this context, as emphasized in Latin America, we can see the short-sightedness of the conscious or unconscious alliance of some Catholic groups towards environments that seemingly provide a sense of security in exchange for favoring a particular type of Christianity and theology, usually amicable and socially non-critical.

5. The world of cultures. Despite efforts, the attitude of Catholic communities reveals no clear formula for the evangelization of large agglomerations and the theology of urban life. As already suggested, they do not attempt to evangelize and inculturate sufficiently with the world of Indian and Afro-Latin American communities. In the name of national cultures, they erase the traditions of the descendants of immigrants, especially the less numerous and those not covered by media and politics. Some Christian groups also live in nostalgia for the European and North American cultures while depreciating the native cultures.¹¹

III. OPPORTUNITIES

1. The Catholic Church in Latin America is undoubtedly the Church with great opportunities for people. As already mentioned, it has a huge human resource potential. It has a good chance of handing down the faith to new generations that will be able to live according to the faith and pass it on to future generations. Other opportunities for the Church are new kinds of followers and witnesses for our times. Latin America needs micro and macro witnesses in everyday life, but also in the world of media, politics, business, new technologies, science and culture. For this to happen, ecclesial communities need conscientious leaders, families and a new mysticism-spirituality, which from a human point of view will help in the formation of such people. The seeds for such conditions, in recent decades, have already partly been sown by various communities and movements. The implementation of such opportunities requires the help of theologians.

¹¹ Cf. J. GARCA, *Nueva evangelización y cultura cristiana en el documento de Santo Domingo*, Lima: Vida y Espiritualidad 1993.

2. The Catholic Church also faces a great opportunity in using its leading role in the Christian world to emphasize the need for an ecumenical movement. In Latin America, the Church needs to enter into dialogue with evangelical communities. People have to overcome the hostility and reluctance of some communities towards other Christian denominations, especially towards Catholics. Doctrinal dialogue is also needed, which will stop the deformation of the Bible and fundamental Christian dogmas by newly formed religious groups.¹²

3. In the context of trends to reevaluate the traditions of Indian and African religions, the proliferation of spiritism, esotericism and theosophy, Far East religions and even forms of pre-Christian religions in popular Catholicism, the Catholic Church has an opportunity to show the value of monotheism and the Judeo-Christian concept of time-history as elements of a credible path of liberation and salvation for man. Catholics, when they change their religion, take a step backwards and return to behavior overcome by Jesus Christ. These religions have an enslaving need to repeat rituals and renew a mythical world order, begging for favors from spiritual beings, a ritual transfer in time, kind of like *in illo tempore*. These issues require inculturation dialogue, evangelical cleansing and clearly presenting Christian doctrine.¹³

4. When it comes to social life, we have to point out two of the many opportunities that the Catholic Church is facing: an *eutopia* (*utopia*) and the critical function of the faith. Every community – sometimes in an unconscious way – has an ideal which it heads towards. Based on the experience of Latin America, it can be said that it is socially desirable if such an *eutopia* (a plan of life that individuals and social groups implement) is transparent, informed, critical and known to all social groups. Without any intentional ideal, which will be the result of the social consensus of individuals and social groups, especially weaker ones, they will be exposed to exclusion, domination, ideological manipulation, various forms of oppression and alienation. Although the goal of Church activity is not a kingdom on earth, but the Heavenly Kingdom, Catholics can help show the meaning of human and Gospel values by implementing them now as a form of anticipation of the *eschaton*. They can play a constructive and critical role in building proper relationships. The field of work is great, for example: the value of life and respect for human dignity or criticism of contemporary forms of idolatry. The promotion

¹² A. PIETRZAK, *Modele ewangelizacji kultur*, p. 177-178.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 178-183.

of one's spiritual life, based on Christian principles in the context of different cultures and religions, has always been important in Latin America.¹⁴

5. The Church in Latin America faces the opportunity to develop a model of faith and life within big cities and their cultures. In recent years, due to urbanization processes, CELAM, the national bishops' conferences, theologians and research institutions have devoted significant attention to issues of faith in the urban context as well as the methodology of pastoral activity. For fundamental theology, urbanization may mean speaking a new language about the credibility of Revelation and the Church, taking into account the urban mental-cultural universe.

IV. THREATS

1. What threatens Catholic communities in Latin America from within? The answer to this question partly results from the above presented issues. However, on account of the specifics of the post-conciliar history of Catholic communities, we must once again return to the problem of mentality and related issues, such as: the problem of internal dialogue, unwillingness and suspicion towards differences, and the phenomenon of marginalization in relation to all that in everyday life is usually seen as deviating from the mainstream.

This was the case in the active years of the generation of leaders in the ecclesial life, among pastors and theologians working in the spirit of Vatican Council II's renewals. It is also the case in contemporary times, when it seems that movements and environments which mainly concentrate on the so-called internal life and ceremonies are winning. It would be a great simplification to state that the dangers Catholic communities face in Latin America are only present in so-called orthodoxy and obedience or praxis and contestation of the establishment, without paying attention to various personal maladies and pathologies within interpersonal relationships and the specific corporatism.

Without a doubt, a problem exists and has deeper levels in the identity of leaders and ordinary Catholics, the history of their formation, the obtained and worked out behavioral patterns, values, symbols and the like. This does not mean that Catholic communities will be saved by psychotherapy, as Nanni Moretti's French-Italian comedy-drama *Habemus papam* suggests. It would be a mistake to suppose that threats are only personal in character, that they

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 183-185.

are *problemas vivenciales y existenciales*. In this case, the Latin American Church needs a type of “social contract” which respects both the *nova et vetera* (Mt 13,52). Nostalgic feelings and ideological restoration only create an orthodoxy facade. Building only on new resolutions deprived of respect for the past also leads to nowhere.

2. In the context of Pentecostal and fundamentalist groups, as already mentioned, there is the need to defend the Christian faith and its integrity. A lack of apologetics and a clear presentation of the *credo* in the life of ecclesial communities leads to watering down and relativism. The risk also includes an insufficient understanding of the mechanisms and causes of rejecting Catholicism. Values such as emphasis on emotional experiences and existential problems, active participation in the liturgy, experiencing community life as an aesthetic and safe meeting place for people and close contact with religious leaders are characteristic of the groups Catholics go to. Although these are present in the life of the Catholic Church, they are not always fully appreciated and do not find a place in everyday life.

3. In the area of contact with other religions, religious indifference and atheism, the so-called religious clientelism, extra-religious spiritualities and spiritualities without religion are a challenge. The lack of evangelization and inculturation with the world of culture and traditional religions can cause that this type of Catholicism will transform into separate religious groups. A challenge for the Church will also be attacks on Catholicism on the part of people from pressure groups with various ideological backgrounds, ethnic and social identity groups, as well as sexual minorities.

4. In the framework of social life, Catholic communities are threatened by a certain sleepiness and passivity towards social phenomenon. A lack of awareness of oncoming processes and bold and appropriate preventive methods can limit the range of Church activities. The attitude towards the new economic, political and ideological powers is also a current problem. In this context, we return to the problem present since colonialism, when Latin America was *Christianitas*. Isn't the popularity of a certain type of Catholicism, basically concentrating on matters of the “spirit” and charitable works, not a socio-technical and manipulative operation serving to maintain political and economic power? Theologians in the second half of the XX century postulated it was so.

5. Today, Latin America is the result of the former and new integration of groups of people. This process is particularly evident in metropolises – giant cities, where new opportunities and threats arise. There is a change in the

context of experiencing humanity, community and encountering the transcendental. This area should be included among the essential challenges. The lack of sufficient evangelization and inculturation in the *civitas humana* and referring it to the *civitas Dei* will not be beneficial to the future of Catholicism in Latin America.¹⁵

V. SOME CONSEQUENCES FOR CREDIBILITY ISSUES

The above-mentioned problems bring us closer to Latin America's meanings in the ecclesial and social life, but of course, not all of them. The article's topic raises the question: what kind of fundamental theology is possible from the perspective of the experiences of the Church in Latin America? Here are four observations, largely marked by the author's current socio-cultural position.

The first is related to the final document of the General Conference of the Latin America Episcopate in Aparecida. The bishops spoke about Catholics leaving the Church and entering protestant communities, and stated that: a) the first reason is not what Catholics believe in, it is not Catholic doctrine, dogmatic phrases and theological problems, but how non-Catholic groups live, work, the pastoral methods they use in contrast to the Catholic methods of parish and diocesan activities; b) the second cause is related to the fact that those who leave the Catholic Church expect answers to uncertainties in their new communities, those which they do not find in their Catholic communities; they are seeking ways to fulfill the aspirations which they cannot achieve in the Catholic Church; they seek activities which they cannot perform as Catholics.¹⁶ The bishops' observations, though they do not exhaust all the causes for leaving the Catholic communities, point to the need for pluralism, where possible, in expressing religiosity, respecting the "otherness" and including it in pastoral plans. It is not hard to see that this problem is not just practical. This issue requires theological justifications.

The second observation concerns the importance of the mission to address theological and fundamental issues. This concerns a mission that is a combination of two tasks: the task that humanity has received from the Creator to be a participant and assistant in the work of creation; and the task of making

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 185-190.

¹⁶ ApC 225.

disciples, which is associated with the so-called missionary mandate of Christ, as John Paul II stated in RMIS 33-38. Without this missionary perspective, it is not possible to become a disciple of Jesus Christ and the ecclesial community (the Church). It is difficult to fully call them Christian theologies, since they are narratives that ignore this missionary dimension. Christian tradition confirms the validity of this seemingly radical thesis. The Church and theology are in a state of permanent mission and serving this mission, and this statement aptly describes modern Latin Catholicism. This mission has become an important criterion for the actions undertaken and issues concerning theology. In other words, theology and ecclesial documents speak of the credibility of Christian hope in the context of carrying out the mission.

The third observation is that in recent decades in the Church in Latin America, we can notice a valuable phenomenon that can be called a return to a multifaceted reality, emphasizing its role in becoming a disciple and missionary of Jesus Christ. Although the Church throughout all periods of its history and in various regions of the world has always been aware of its position in history, today the Church in Latin America is distinguished by an attempt to overcome the problems caused by the intellectual and colonial history as well as new phenomena. In the framework of the option for the poor and excluded, the agenda of theological research also included problems troubling ordinary people, usually living in the so-called popular culture and religiosity. Documents of the Church and the work of theologians quite often emerge from Latin American reality and focus on reality. Identifying it by applying scientific methods has practically become the rule. The texts arising in this way present the meaning of the Christian faith in relation to reality. At the same time, they are the results of faith inculturation, which is critical, liberates and leads to salvation, and shows the life lived according to Christian spirituality to be the appropriate and right path to individual and social fulfillment.

Fourth. A SWOT analysis leads to the development of action strategies. By adopting a similar approach to the discussed issues, we can distinguish the efficient models of analyzing the manifestations of the Church's life and fundamental theology. The combination of strengths and opportunities would create optimistic analyses; strengths and threats – conservative; weaknesses and opportunities – competing with others; weaknesses and threats – defensive. Although the Church is a specific community, for members of ecclesial communities and their leaders, experiencing strength, weakness, opportunities and threats is not something strange. Moreover, these are the factors that

play an important role in the processes of creating meaning in life, both for Christians themselves and other people observing their lifestyles. Therefore, in the analysis of the expressions of the Church's life, fundamental theology, which is always ready to justify Christian hope (1 Peter 3:15), should take into account the Church's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats towards it, in the aspect of its *kerygma* and its implementation in different socio-cultural contexts. This issue, however, needs to be further analyzed.

VI. CONCLUSION

The discussed issues point to the usefulness of the analysis of the life of ecclesial communities. The outlined research methodology brings a theologian "down to earth" and to the present times and real problems that are far from personal and corporate interests. It shows the wide range of issues important at the present moment in history that require an evaluation linking the theological criteria and the human *ratio*. A theologian's task in this project is to identify the weighty and objectified problems, to determine their nature, scope and participants, internal and external dynamics, and above all to "rise" (hence the name *via ascendens*) through critical human reason to the revealed truth about God, the Church, man, human society and all creatures.

The deductive approach to faith and the privileged list of topics is common today (sometimes even theoretically and practically insignificant or already resolved), and may cause that theology will only partially fulfill its proper function. It is difficult to speak about credibility without reference to the faith and life of the Church, to people and the context in which the disciples of Jesus Christ carry out the mission entrusted to them. Therefore, demanding an analysis of the expressions of the Church's life and its conditions seems to be a good postulate. In Latin America, this postulate found a positive implementation. An example of such an approach are the final documents of the General Conference of the Latin America Episcopate and the theological projects for which the local faith and ecclesial experience have become a permanent part of creating a theological narrative, making the life of the individual, community and society more dynamic. Although the proposed return of the theologian to reality is noteworthy, however, it should not be treated as a *panacea* without shortcomings and as the Philosopher's stone solving all the old and contemporary dilemmas of credibility. The presented methodology is only one of the possible ways to upgrade theology

and restore its proper function in the Church, in the lives of individuals, communities and societies.

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ZNACZENIE BADAŃ PRZEJAWÓW ŻYCIA KOŚCIOŁA NA PRZYKŁADZIE AMERYKI ŁACIŃSKIEJ

Streszczenie

Artykuł porusza zagadnienie metodologii badań eklezjologii fundamentalnej. Autor zwraca uwagę na wartość i potrzebę uaktualnienia metody *via ascendens*, zwłaszcza jej odmiany, która bada przejawy życia Kościoła. Na przykładzie Ameryki Łacińskiej opisuje pięć wybranych aspektów życia Kościoła od wewnątrz: ekumenizm, stosunek do religii niechrześcijańskich, obojętnych religijnie i do ateizmu oraz do życia społecznego i kultur. Za pomocą narzędzia heurystyczne SWOT omawia ich przykładowe mocne i słabe strony, możliwości i zagrożenia. W ostatniej części, uwzględniając doświadczenie Kościoła w Ameryce Łacińskiej, sygnalizuje potrzebę poszerzenia przedmiotu teologii fundamentalnej o niespełnione oczekiwania tych, którzy pozostawiają Kościół; podkreśla znaczenie wykonywania misji jako źródło i cel badań teologicznych; zwraca uwagę na rangę w teologii kwestii nurtujących różne grupy społeczne.

Słowa kluczowe: teologia fundamentalna; eklezjologia; metodologia; Ameryka Łacińska.