

THE DYNAMICS BETWEEN CATHOLIC POPULAR RELIGIOSITY AND CHURCH LITURGY

HANS GEYBELS

[The great evangelical truth is that in the Church it is] not the wise and powerful, but the obscure, the unlearned and the weak who constitutes her real strength. Hl. John Henry Newman¹

A good old lady with a small garden, but who has love, reaps more fruit from that love alone than a learned magister with a big garden and who fathoms the secrets of nature. St Bonaventure²

INTRODUCTION

“Underlying popular piety, as a fruit of the inculturated Gospel, is an active evangelizing power which we must not underestimate: to do so would be to fail to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit. Instead, we are called to promote and strengthen it, in order to deepen the never-ending process of inculturation. Expressions of popular piety have much to teach us; for those who are capable of reading them, they are a *locus theologicus* which demands our attention, especially at a time when we are looking to the new evangelization.” (*Evangelii gaudium*, no. 126).

These are not my words, but those of Pope Francis. They are very special because never has a church document gone so far in recognizing popular religiosity as this exhortation. We had to

¹ Appendix V of the third edition of *The Arian Crisis of the Fourth Century*, 454-455. Quoted in Dermot Fenlon, “Elite and Popular Religion: The case of Newman,” in *Elite and Popular Religion, Studies in Church History* Vol. 42, eds. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory, (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), 372-382; 382.

² The quotation appears in Serge Bonnet, *Prières Secrètes des Français D'aujourd'hui*, (Paris, Les éditions du cerf, 1976), 8. Republished in Serge Bonnet, *Défense du Catholicisme Populaire*, (Paris, Les éditions du cerf, 2016), 273-334.

wait for a Latin American pope before we could turn to these words. Anyone with a little familiarity with the Catholicism of big parts of Latin America (or any Catholicism with Spanish roots) immediately understands why.

This contribution deals with popular religiosity. Dissertations could be filled with what exactly should be understood by 'popular religiosity or devotion' and especially why it should no longer be called that. I gladly refer to semantic studies for that. I understand popular religiosity to mean what it is commonly understood to mean: the way in which Catholicism is lived concretely, sometimes in agreement and sometimes in tension with how church leaders in Rome think Catholicism should be lived.³ Catholicism is a dialectical process between what is prescribed (the preached faith) and what is concretely lived/believed (the practiced faith). There are no two extremes, rather a continuum. I am not going to make up too many synonyms for popular religiosity. It will always be clear when I am talking about the religion concretely lived and the religion as it should be lived.

On that continuum I just mentioned, popular religiosity appears to have something appealing about it. Theologians and philosophers had predicted the disappearance of the phenomenon in these times of rationalism and/or secularization, but nothing could be further from the truth.⁴ The fact that it is absent from the major debates on religion in sociology, philosophy and theology does not mean that the phenomenon is non-existent.⁵ Indeed, the question is through which vehicle postmodern man allows himself to be evangelized: through a presentation of the dogma of the Trinity, through an invitation to Sunday mass, through a declaration of the Church's morality on marriage and sexuality or

³ In other words, folk devotion is the private context in which "official" religion is lived. Folk devotion does not refer to the religious experience of a particular social class, but to the way religion is lived.

⁴ Robert Peloux and Christian Pian (ed.), *Les Religiosités Populaires. Archaisme ou Modernité?* Ivry-sur-Seine, (Les éditions de l'atelier, 2010), 12.

⁵ Take, for example, the great debates in France around Marcel Gauchet's *le monde désenchanté*: a lot of information on institutional religious experience and nothing on popular religiosity (see Marcel Gauchet, *Un monde désenchanté?*)

... by lighting a candle and by taking a moment to pray at a statue of Mary.⁶ For a good theological understanding, this is about the phenomenon of inculturation. The church was able to inculturate itself almost flawlessly in the Hellenistic world 2,000 years ago. The issue is that today it is still reasoning in those terms, with fatal consequences for popular religiosity, which is made entirely subservient to official religion, but which perhaps shows the best evidence of inculturation.

Perhaps a third way is possible, between uncritically extolling the phenomenon or totally renouncing it? I want to explore that question here. If popular religiosity and official religion need each other, they would be better off appreciating each other than fighting each other or - more subtly - swallowing each other up. What if one existed by grace of the other? What if one could not exist without the other? Is such a relationship conceivable? I believe so and want to demonstrate this by delving into the past, among other things. The past not only reveals the genealogy of the conflict between the two, but also provides for possible solutions.⁷

THE GENEALOGY OF THE CONFLICT

The conflict between the religious orthopraxis prescribed by church authorities and the concrete religious practice of "the people" on the other hand are brought to a head in the age of Modernity. In the mid-16th century, one of the most influential councils ever takes place, especially regarding the relationship between being church at the top and being church at the bottom: the Council of Trent. The reason is that the council sought to respond to popular and rapidly expanding varieties of

⁶ Maximilien de la Martinière, *La Piété populaire. Une chance pour l'évangélisation*, (Paris, Médiaspaul Editions, 2019), 19. I am regularly guided in this contribution by this French Fidei-Donum priest with years of experience from Latin America.

⁷ Throughout the research for this contribution, it turned out that I had to rely mainly on French literature. The debate between popular religiosity and official religion apparently played out much more sharply there than in the rest of Europe.

Protestantism, and that the latter, among other things, reacted fiercely against a Catholic church that they felt was permeated by superstition. Even within the church, a lot of religious practices led to ironic comments. Here is Erasmus speaking in his *Praise of Folly*:

Without any doubt, the party of folly includes all those who are fond of hearing and reciting miracles and miracle stories. [] Closely related to these superstitious are those who live in the foolish but sweet belief that no misfortune will befall them on the day they behold a statue or a painting of that giant of a Saint Christopher; or that those who have greeted Saint Barbara with a prescribed prayer; or that in a short time, whoever has worshipped Saint Erasmus with a certain number of candles and a certain number of prayers will become rich! In the place of Hercules, they invented St George and hold a second Hippolytus. It has much in common that they also devoutly worship his horse, and they decorate it with trinkets and bells. With such small gifts they try to secure the favor of Saint George. [] It is equally crazy that every region has a special patron saint and that people put one interest under the protection of this saint and the other under that of another saint, while they invoke a separate saint for every eventuality: Saint Apollonia should come to the aid of a toothache, Saint Hyacinth should assist women in childbirth, Saint Christopher should bring benevolent relief in case of shipwreck, Saint Isidore should protect flocks and so on and so forth. Too many to mention. There are also saints who provide assistance on more than one point, above all the Blessed Virgin, to whom the people attribute almost more miracles than her son performed. What else but foolish things do people ask of their saints?⁸

The Council of Trent (1545-1563) aims to bring internal order through sweeping reforms that both affirm and purge. The

⁸ Erasmus of Rotterdam, *The Praise of Folly*, nos. 40-41. Erasmus is still kind compared to Luther's *Kirchenpostille* against the "abominable idolatry" of saint worship of 1522 and John Calvin's sarcastic tract *Treatise on Relics* of 1543.

worship of saints is confirmed but also purged. Numerous non-existent and dubious saints are thrown off the calendar of saints. Prayers and litanies must be ecclesiastically approved, relics authenticated and so on. Once the episcopate is imbued with the conciliar spirit of Trent, that council becomes palpable at its base throughout the Catholic world.⁹ To the medieval world of faith, steeped in what is usually labelled superstition and magic, the church hierarchy seeks to put an end to it. And ancillary activities also must go. Done with celebrating the patronal feast *in fumigatione tabacchi et sumptione pinterum*.¹⁰

With Trent, a new civilizing offensive gets under way. Exactly four hundred years later, the second one gets underway, but that is for later. It is worthwhile now to look at how Trent installs itself in Scherpenheuvel, the biggest pilgrim place in Belgium. I take the example of Scherpenheuvel, but what happens there is happening in the whole of Europe at that very moment. Scherpenheuvel, early 1600s: masses of pilgrims flock to the oak tree on the hill because some startling healing miracles have been observed. If the pilgrims there do what they do everywhere, at first glance it seems little Catholic. They hang all kinds of notes with Hebrew, Greek or Latin characters against the oak tree to obtain healing, they touch the oak tree with those notes and then hang it on the neck of their sick cow or around their own neck, they dilute magic potion with holy water and strengthen the power by mixing relics into it, they have the right bundle of herbs consecrated on St John (24 June) which will protect them from lightning, after Communion they secretly remove the host from their mouths and

⁹ An overview: Nicole Lemaitre, 'L'idéal Pastoral de Réforme et le Concile de Trente (XIVe-XVIe siècle)', in *The Council of Trent: Reform and Controversy in Europe and Beyond (1545-1700) Vol 2 : Between Bishops and Princes*, eds., Wim François and Violet Soen, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 9-32.

¹⁰ "Smoking tobacco and drinking beer": this telling phrase (written during an episcopal visitation of a parish?) appears without further source reference in Jan Art, "Clerus en Volksreligie in Vlaanderen Sinds de Nieuwste Tijd: Ne Peius Adveniat" in *Religieuze Volkscultuur. De Spanning Tussen de Voorgescreven Orde en de Geleefde Praktijk*, eds., Gerard Rooijakkers en Theo van der Zee ed Nijmegen, SUN, 99-118; 106.

then bury it in their fields as a guarantee against vermin and for an abundant harvest, and so on.¹¹

All these peculiar practices, as well as the numerous reported healing miracles at Scherpenheuvel, put the Archbishop of Malines, Mathias Hovius, to the test. Hovius is a product of the Catholic reform following the Council of Trent (1545-1563). That council recognized and affirmed the worship of saints, yet also wanted to strongly purge the phenomenon under the influence of Protestant reproaches. Numerous - in the eyes of the council fathers - magical practices must be curbed, the calendar of saints must be purified, relics must be authenticated by bishops and some religious superiors and so on. So Scherpenheuvel is no gift for the level-headed and reasonable Hovius. Yet he is confronted with credible testimonies of impressive healings on the one hand and the archdukes' faith in Scherpenheuvel on the other. It makes him strongly committed to developing Scherpenheuvel into a fully-fledged place of pilgrimage.

Hovius did this in a way that could be expected of a church prelate: a purification of the faith praxis by eradicating all 'superstitious and magical' practices. Since he found the then parish priest too lax and slothful, he had him assisted by two assisting priests who had to ensure the smooth running of the chapel by the oak tree. As a matter of fact, the oak must go. That way, the faithful can no longer tear off their bark to eat as medicine. The old priest still turns a blind eye too much to the practices of the pilgrims and the bishop decides to have him replaced by a more vigorous man, Joost Bouckaert, who later becomes a bishop himself. Hovius undertakes all this to purge the pilgrimage site of rituals and expressions of faith not recognized by the church.

The next step is to publish the official history of the new place of pilgrimage. For this, he engaged a Brussels town clerk, Filip Numan, who could not be suspected of popular religious sympathies. Like Hovius, he had university studies and placed little

¹¹ I picked these practices from Eddy Put en Craig Harline, *Verloren schapen, schurftige herders. De helse dagen van bisschop Mathias Hovius (1542-1620)*, (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2002), 83. To be clear, they are not specifically re-enacted at Scherpenheuvel on the oak. They are widely spread rituals in the seventeenth century.

value on popular religiosity. Numan's publication appears in 1604 under the title *Historie vande mirakelen die onlanx in grooten te gebeuren door die intercessie en voorbidding van die H. Maget Maria op een plaetse ghenoeemt Scherpenheuvel by die stadt van Sichen in Brabant* [History of the miracles that recently happened in great numbers by intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the place called Scherpenheuvel near the town of Zichem in Brabant]. It is indeed a miracle book: for Hovius and Numan, the existence of miracles is beyond any doubt. They are just not brought about by the oak tree or by the superstitious and magical rituals of pilgrims. Not by chewing the oak bark, not by wearing amulets, not by walking around the oak tree x number of times, but because God wills it. It is striking that Numan describes dozens of miracles, but none were worked by popular religiosity. All happened after confession and communion. In doing so, Numan takes a run at reality.¹² It is also striking that Numan does not want to rely on the testimonies of ordinary believers to attest the miracles, but on official deeds of aldermen and other notables.

The history of Scherpenheuvel four hundred years ago exposes the relationship, problematic for the church, between popular religiosity on the one hand and ecclesiastical orthopraxis on the other. Just as there is orthodoxy - correct doctrine - the church also imposes orthopraxy - correct behaviour. In this case, this does not involve correct moral conduct but correct ritual handling of the sacred. On one side are the bishops who guard the Church's straight doctrine and practice; on the other is the majority of the faithful who seek to deal with the transcendent in their own way. In between stands many priests who mostly seek a golden mean. They owe obedience to their bishop, but they also do not want to alienate themselves from the faith community entrusted to them.

What happened in Scherpenheuvel and in countless other parishes we find out from visitation reports. Visitations are a real scourge for popular religiosity. They are a product of the Council of Trent, which decreed that every bishop (or his delegate if he is unable to attend) should inspect and, if necessary, discipline the

¹² Ibid., 85.

whole of his diocese at least every two years (*Sessio XXIV*, C. 3). The council wanted the duty of visitation to have two effects: to establish pure doctrine and restore or preserve good morals as well as to promote piety among the people. Visitation places a particularly heavy burden on the bishops who usually like to take up this task to monitor more efficiently what happens in the parishes.¹³

Almost exactly four hundred years after Council of Trent closes its doors, the Second Vatican Council opens in Rome. For our theme, that council is at least as far-reaching as Trent. As will become clear, it is confirmation of Trent. In traditionalist circles, one often hears that the Second Vatican Council is at the root of the decline of church practice. Communion on the hand, the introduction of the vernacular, the introduction of a rite of the Eucharist perceived as less sacred, the document on religious freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*) etcetera have caused more and more people to turn their backs on the church. I don't believe these are the reasons why the vast majority of people have dropped out, yet there is a link between that apostasy and the council, and the link to understand it lies in the relationship between the faith the church wants to promote and the faith that the people live concretely.¹⁴

After the council - as after Trent - a separation occurred between the new religious norms that emerged from the council, on the one hand, and the norms of the people of God, on the other.¹⁵ The rift is situated in three domains: devotion, beliefs and the views regarding church and clergy. In other words, an 'elitist' religious life based on catechesis, Bible study, the study of Christian spirituality and so on is emerging. It is propagated by a progressive

¹³ Michel Cloet, *Itinerarium visitationum Antonii Triest episcopi Gandavensis (1623-1654). De visitatieverslagen van bisschop Triest*, (Leuven: Belgisch Centrum voor Landelijke Geschiedenis, 1976), v.

¹⁴ I follow the analysis of Guillaume Cuchet, *Comment notre monde a cessé d'être chrétien. Anatomie d'un effondrement*, (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 2018), 130-142.

¹⁵ French Church historian and expert on the history of the clergy, Luc Perrin even speaks of "neo-tridentinism" to characterize post-Vatican II pastoralism. It is a pastoral approach characterized by a more spiritual approach to the sacraments and a purging of popular religiosity: Luc Perrin, *Paris à l'heure de Vatican II*, (Paris, Éditions de l'Atelier, 1997), 300.

clergy, assisted by enthusiastic believers who are also imbued with the conciliar spirit that wants to go to the heart of evangelical Christianity. This is expressed concretely, among other things, in the statues of saints that - when they are not thrown out of the church - are stored safely in their attic. It is the period of a great paradox: among the elite, a preference develops for the weak and vulnerable, but without much respect for their beliefs. These need to be evangelized. Popular uplift enters the realm of faith and is propagated by an elite that generally has a lick of respect for the concept of 'popular uplift'.¹⁶

The upheaval going on from the 1960s is best illustrated by a 1976 book by Dominican Serge Bonnet: *Prières Secrètes des Français D'aujourd'hui*.¹⁷ In that volume, Bonnet publishes a selection from 140,000 intentions he found in intention books and on intention slips in 11 major French places of pilgrimage. He shows that where church authorities have not intervened strongly in the faith of the masses, that faith endures well. The book is not thanked to him by church authorities. They understand the Dominican's message all too well: several post-conciliar pastoral orientations are partly at the root of the rift between "church and people." Many things well-intentioned by the council (such as the introduction of the vernacular, the tutoring of God, the new marriage and baptismal rites that tend to increase the conditions of access to those sacraments and so on) have ended up in their opposite and are perceived by the people as alien to their faith context.

It was not only the changed views regarding devotion that profoundly changed the situation. So have traditional beliefs,

¹⁶ In the words of French theologian Jean-Marie R. Tillard, "Sensus fidelium. Réflexion théologique," in, *Foi populaire. Foi savante, Cogitatio Fidei*, vol. 87, ed. Jean-Marie R. Tillard (Paris: Les éditions du cerf, 1976), 9-40; 12 : "Moreover, while the renewal of the Liturgies has purified the official texts, done away with the secondary appendices, reduced the gestures to their purest expression, reduced the para-liturgical acts to a strict minimum, in short, made the demands of the 'learned faith' triumph, everywhere there is a need for rites that are 'closer to life', 'less riveted to dogmatic affirmations', 'more spontaneous'." (own translation)

¹⁷ Serge Bonnet, *Prières secrètes des Français d'aujourd'hui*, (Paris: Les éditions du cerf, 1976).

which many 'elitists' have questioned. These preferred to keep quiet about the four extremes, hell, purgatory, fasting, indulgences, rosary prayers, worship of saints ... The most frequently heard phrase from that period is: "What have they all been telling us?" Is it any wonder that people dropped out? Add to this the *Humanae vitae* document (1968), which was indigestible for the people, the fact that so many priests and religious were retiring, Sunday duty and the other four commandments of the Holy Church being felt less keenly ... The old faith was shaking on its foundations.

THE ERA OF THE DIRECTORY

The Church regularly expresses itself on faith and morals in various kinds of documents: social doctrine, bioethics, sexuality, ecology ... Popular religiosity is given a stepmotherly treatment in the process.¹⁸ The first important and quite comprehensive document on popular religiosity is Pope Paul VI's apostolic exhortation *Marialis cultus* which appears on Candlemas 1974. The subtitle reads: *For the right ordering and development of devotion to Our*

¹⁸ Traces of magisterial talk of popular religiosity in church documents are also found in Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Mediator Dei et Hominum* nos. 23-32, 35, 107, 110, 150, 170-175, (1947); in the first constitution of Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* nos. 13, 60-61, 79, 105, 107, (1963); as well as in the 1964 constitution *Lumen Gentium* nos. 67-67; in Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Christi Matri Rosarii* (1966); in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* no. 48, (1975) by the same pope; in a series of documents by Pope John-Paul II including the apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* no. 54, (1979); the apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* no. 61, (1981); in the encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* no. 44, (1987); in the apostolic letter *Vicesimus Quintus Annus* no. 18, (1988); in the apostolic letter *Novo Millennium Ineunte* no. 34, (2001); in the letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* nos. 13, 19, 43, (2002); in the encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* nos. 10, 25, (2003); in the apostolic letter *Spiritus Et Sponsa* no. 10, (2003); in the apostolic letter *Mane Nobiscum Domine* chapter 2, (2004). In 2004, another document by the Congregation for Divine Worship appeared under the title *Redemptionis Sacramentum* no. 41. In a document by Pope Benedict XVI: the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* nos. 66-68, (2007). And finally in documents by Pope Francis: *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 122-126. The pope, in the capacity of Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, is behind one of the world's most important Church documents on popular religiosity, namely the 2007 document for the Aparecida Conference, CELAM V.

Lady. The pope is concerned because of the numerous excesses in Marian devotion, and he wants to streamline it according to the outline drawn during Vatican II. The pope wants to integrate Marian worship into a pastoral catechetical process, more specifically into a kind of liturgical catechesis. All (new) forms of popular religiosity should be biblically founded, coherent with the liturgical year, ecumenical and anthropological. In other words, they must be completely assimilated to the Roman liturgy.

The first document the Church ever devoted integrally to popular religiosity is the *Directory on Popular religiosity and Liturgy. Principles and Guidelines* (2001).¹⁹ The document is a publication of the Congregation for Divine Worship. It opens with Pope John Paul II's message to the plenary assembly of that congregation. The pope shows in no uncertain terms how the document should be interpreted when he makes the distinction between the true liturgy and that to which it can never be reduced (no. 2).

As is typical of most Vatican documents, there are hot and cold blows. This can be seen as a flaw, but it also offers opportunities! On the one hand, popular religiosity is praised, but on the other, it must completely transform itself according to Church standards.

In the first paragraph of the *Directory*, the congregation expresses its concern/concern about popular religiosity:

While this Congregation guarantees the growth and promotion of the liturgy, the pinnacle towards which the Church strives in all her actions and also the force from which all her strength derives, it nevertheless also sees the need that other forms of popular piety and their fruitful contribution should not be neglected in order to live in union with Christ in the Church in accordance with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council.

¹⁹ The *Directory* can be consulted online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_en.html

From the start, two principles are clearly defined: the primacy of the liturgy and the *truncus communis* of liturgy and popular religiosity (always called *popular piety* by the document). The Congregation follows the traditional track: on the one hand, safeguarding the richness of popular religiosity; on the other, purifying that popular religiosity. With the *Directory*, the Congregation wants to help the bishops and their collaborators - for whom the document is intended - in that purification. The pope ends the introductory address of the document with an explicit appeal to the bishops to take their pastoral duty seriously to avoid any excess concerning popular piety. Bishops must promote popular piety, but also purge it. Folk religious practices should never be integrated into the liturgy.²⁰

Because the Gospel is measure and criterion of judgment for every old and new form of expression of Christian piety, it must make use of exercises of piety and devotional practices and must be accompanied by a purification that is sometimes necessary to preserve a proper reference to the Christian mystery. For popular piety applies what is also said of the Christian liturgy, namely, "*that it cannot in any way include rites of sorcery, superstition, spiritualism, revenge or those which have a sexual background.*" (no. 12)

The bishops should keep four principles in mind when renewing popular religiosity. We quote the long, crucial paragraph 12:

In this sense, one understands that the renewal sought by the Second Vatican Council must somehow inspire a proper assessment and renewal of the exercises of piety and devotional practices. Popular piety must be characterized by: *Biblical* inspiration (because a Christian prayer cannot possibly be recited without

²⁰ This last statement comes from John Paul II, *Vicesimus Quintus Annus*, no. 2. The pope adds that the correct pastoral approach is to build the liturgy on popular religious practices, purify them and lead them to the liturgy as an offering for the people.

direct or indirect reference to a page of the Bible), *liturgical* inspiration (from the moment it prepares for or echoes the mysteries celebrated in liturgical acts), *ecumenical* inspiration (that is, the regard for other Christian sentiments and traditions without coming to prohibitions that are inappropriate for this), *anthropological* inspiration (expressed either in the preservation of symbols and expressions that are significant for a particular people - here, however, one should avoid pointless archaism - or in an attempt to enter into dialogue with contemporary sentiments). For such an innovation to be fruitful, it must be imbued with a pedagogical meaning and achieved gradually, considering places and circumstances.

The similarity with the four features already listed in *Marialis Cultus* (no. 31) is striking, although the Directory does not refer to *Marialis Cultus*. *Marialis Cultus* does at this point recall paragraph 13 of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. That paragraph which deals explicitly with popular religiosity (i.e. “exercises of piety,” *piae exercitiae*) reads:

The exercises of piety of the Christian people, if in accordance with the laws and directives of the Church, are highly recommended, especially when prescribed by the Holy See. Special dignity should also be accorded to the devout exercises of private churches, held by virtue of the bishops' prescription, according to legally approved customs or books. One must, however, consider the liturgical times in these exercises, and arrange them in such a way that they are in harmony with the sacred liturgy, derive in some sense from it, and lead the people to the liturgy, which, after all, by virtue of its nature far surpasses these exercises.

Perhaps even more crucial than paragraph 12 is paragraph 58, because it regulates the relationship between liturgy and popular religiosity.

Liturgy and popular piety are two legitimate expressions of Christian worship, even though they cannot be equated. They cannot be opposed to each other, but they must be coordinated, as described in the constitution on the liturgy: “One must [...] so arrange these exercises that they harmonize with the sacred liturgy, emerge in a certain sense from the liturgy and show the people the way to the liturgy, which, after all, by its very nature rises high above these exercises.”

It is notable that a central sentence from this paragraph is translated with a different nuance in the different translations of the Directory (all italics are mine to emphasize where the problem lies): French: “*La liturgy et la piété populaire sont donc deux expressions culturelles qui doivent se situer dans une relation mutuelle et féconde.*” English: “The liturgy and popular piety are two forms of worship *which are* in mutual and fruitful relationship with each other.” The English translation softens the pill. There is no Latin reference document of the *Directory* and so we can only track down the precisely intended nuance through the Italian text: “*I pii esercizi del popolo cristiano [] siano ordinati in modo da essere in armonia con la sacra Liturgia.*” The text is clearly more compelling.

In conclusion regarding this important church document, we can say that two readings are possible. A benevolent reading of the *Directory* looks at the value the magisterium places on popular religiosity. If there were no sincere appreciation, perhaps such a comprehensive document would never be devoted to it.²¹

A more critical reading of the *Directory* notes that the magisterium only wants to recognize popular religiosity if it assimilates to the official liturgy. This is explicitly stated, but it also manifests itself in smaller things. For example, the document uses numerous words for what concerns us here (exercises of piety, pious exercises, devotions, popular piety, etc.) but nowhere are these described as forms of liturgy. In addition, it is significant that the

²¹ Peter C. Phan (ed.), *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines. A Commentary*, Collegeville MI, Liturgical Press, 2005. This volume offers a solid, goodwill-critical analysis of the *Directory*.

title of the *Directory* mentions popular piety and liturgy in the same breath, even though they are not treated equally.²²

PRELIMINARY BILAN

If bishops were to have the directives of the *Directory* correctly applied in their dioceses, it would mean the end of popular religiosity as we have known it for centuries, and nothing new could ever emerge either. On the one hand, popular religiosity is praised, but on the other, it must be completely based on the prescribed liturgy. The church hierarchy ultimately bets everything on the liturgy as the sole source and pinnacle of our Christian identity. The magisterium denies all other sources from which flows the water that can refresh our spiritual life. Ultimately, popular religiosity is marginalized and even abandoned, even if that is not the direct intention of the magisterium.²³ Is there still an area for

²² The tone of “appreciate but purge and assimilate to the official liturgy we find in all official messages of the hierarchy. Two examples to conclude this magisterial section. On 8 April 2001, Benedict XVI addresses plenary of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America. Popular religiosity is seen as an important tool of the liturgy in the process of inculturation and so it must be valued, but “the liturgy is always called upon to constitute a point of reference that enables us to channel with lucidity and prudence the ardent desires for prayer and charismatic life that manifest themselves in popular piety. Popular piety must certainly always be purified and refocused, but it deserves our love [].” (*L’Osservatore Romano*. Edition hebdomadaire en langue française, jeudi 14 (Avril 2001):7, own translation) On 12 November 2003, the US bishops launched a document on popular religiosity and liturgy (*Popular religiosity Practices: Basic Questions and Answers*), not to condemn popular religiosity but to take an encouraging approach to it. But it is true that popular religiosity and pious practices must always be in line with canon law and the orthodoxy of the church, and they must not take precedence over the liturgy. In other words, it must become an ecclesiastical orthopraxy, thus ceasing to exist! The document is available online.

²³ Such is the analysis of James Empereur in *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines. A Commentary*, ed. Peter C. Phan, (Collegeville MI: Liturgical Press, 2005), 9. In each of the magisterial texts, four concepts in dealing with popular religiosity surface: welcoming (*accogliere*), distinguishing (*discernere*), valorizing (*valorizzare*), educating (*educare*) and assimilating (*armonizzare*): Ugo Ughi, “Accogliere e vagliare,” in, *La pietà popolare. Folklore, fede, e liturgia*, ed.

the Liturgical Movement here? Namely, the true integration of liturgy and popular religiosity into the faith praxis of the church?

Popular religiosity has a rationale all its own (and most of the time in connection with the prescribed othopraxis). It is not legalized from a higher institution and grows, flourishes and dies from a spiritual and liturgical dynamic. Sometimes these developments are far removed from what the church liturgy prescribes; sometimes there is great dependence.

Along with Spanish theologian Roberto Goizueta, I do not place popular religiosity in opposition to the Church's official liturgy. He sees the same sacramentality flowing through popular religiosity and liturgy. Only the cultural dressing of the two is different, but both manifest a similar sacramentality.²⁴ The reason Goizueta does so is that popular religiosity provides an access to God for many people that they cannot find in the normative rites of the church. It makes no sense to evangelize popular religiosity if it is inherently self-evangelizing. These theological views resemble the praxis of the Middle Ages.

BACK TO THE MIDDLE AGES

The tension in *rebus catholicae* between *le prescrit* and *le vécu* goes back no further in time than modernity. In the Middle Ages, there is great tolerance towards all kinds of 'popular' elements in religious praxis.²⁵ The conflicts in antiquity and the Middle Ages between elite culture and popular culture tend to be about other things, for example the relationship to earlier, pagan religion or to heterodox views (Arianism, Donatism, Montanism, Pelagianism, etc.). Another difference is that the relationship between people and clergy changes. Especially after Trent, the clergy functions more strongly as mediators between God and man. Medieval people have

Antonio Mastantuono (Cammini di Chiesa, Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 2015), 29-45.

²⁴ Roberto Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesus: Toward a Hispanic-Latino Theology of Accompaniment*, Maryknoll NY, Orbis Books; quoted in *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines. A Commentary*, ed. Peter C. Phan, 14.

²⁵ See, for example, Micheline Laliberté, "Religion populaire et superstition au Moyen Âge," in *Théologiques* 8 no.1, (2000):19-36.

a more direct relationship with the transcendent.²⁶ It may indeed seem surprising, but popular religiosity as we know it today is a product of modernity, when elites increasingly withdraw from popular culture and when the clergy's participation in those practices becomes increasingly sanctioned.²⁷ In the Middle Ages, relations between the top and the base, between the religious authorities and the faithful people, are less formal and rigid. Two-way communication is possible between the two giants and I would like to explore some examples of this.

TOP DOWN: MARIAN APPARITIONS

At first glance, Marian apparitions seem typical of popular religiosity.²⁸ Since the nineteenth century, the Catholic world has been familiar with countless apparitions of the Blessed Virgin to simple people: the Paris Rue du Bac, Pontmain, La Salette, Lourdes, Fatima ... It will surprise many that this devotion finds its origins in the theological elite and that it only becomes established among the people from the twelfth century onwards.

The genesis of Marian apparitions can be found in the aftermath of the Council of Constantinople (381) on which a Mariophany is developed analogous to the dogmatic truth regarding divine immanence. The concept of the apparition is put at the service of a construction of orthodoxy by the council fathers. In other words: Mary must vouch for the orthodoxy developed at the council. Her example suits the fathers because her immanence allows her apparitions/revelations to put into words THE

²⁶ Marie-Hélène Froeschlé-Chopard, "Les dévotions populaires d'après les visites pastorales. Un exemple: Le diocèse de Vence au début du XVIII^e siècle," in *Revue d'histoire de l'église de France* 60 (1974):85-100; 99 and William A. Christian, *Person and God in a Spanish Valley*, (London and New York: Seminart Press, 1972), 183.

²⁷ Gerard Rooijakkers en Theo van der Zee, "Ten geleide. Van volksgeloof naar religieuze volkscultuur," in *Religieuze volkscultuur. De spanning tussen de voorgeschreven orde en de geleefde praktijk*, eds., Gerard Rooijakkers en Theo van der Zee, (Nijmegen: SUN), 7-15; 7.

²⁸ I base this section on Mariana fancies entirely on Sylvie Barnay's study, *Le ciel sur la terre. Les apparitions de la Vierge au Moyen Age*, Paris, Cerf, 1999.

Revelation. The Greek fathers of the late fourth century are the first to put Marian apparitions into a narrative structure, but also the first to define its conceptual contours: the Marian apparition must legitimize the doctrinal views of the Cappadocians. All this must be interpreted against the neo-Platonic background of the Fathers, which assumes that dreams and visions put people in direct contact with God.

The first Marian apparition - as far as currently known - is reported by Gregory of Nyssa (†ca. 395) in his *vita* of Gregory the Thaumaturg. Mary plays the exemplary role of mirror of Revelation there. She appears simultaneously with John the Evangelist, commanding the latter to reveal to the saint the words of a *creed*. It is Mary who invites her to reveal the mysteries of faith. At the same time, she overshadows the appearance of the apostle. John the Evangelist is a popular saint in the fourth century, but because of this event, the Virgin overshadows John in the hierarchy of intercession. The Virgin is henceforth the mirror through which God presents himself to the world.

It takes several centuries, but from the 12th century onwards, Mariophany is popularized. From now on, it is no longer about dozens of stories, but thousands. Extensive miracle collections of stories with the Virgin's apparition as the main theme emerged from around 1150 onwards. These collections were obviously created by literate clerics, but from the 12th century onwards they increasingly became part of pastoral praxis, reaching all sections of the population. Along with the popularization of the theme of apparitions, the intention also changes. The apparitions no longer serve to confirm dogmas supernaturally, but to make people believe in the miraculous presence of the Virgin.

In the 13th century, the phenomenon of Marian apparitions reaches a provisional peak and its meaning changes again. In the twelfth century, Marian apparitions answer the human yearning to see the divine face of God on earth. The twelfth century is the century of the humanization of God. After the fourth Council of Lateran (1215), the Virgin is enlisted in the fight against heresies and to confirm Church unity. The Church's job is to make people believe; the believers' job is to believe well. Marian apparitions underline Mary's exemplarity as a believer. She becomes

the reference *par excellence* that invites Christians to believe in the same exemplary way. Apparitions become "model apparitions". Mary becomes the saint *par excellence*, the *exemplum* worthy of imitation by the faithful. Through Marian apparitions, the Church transmits those hagiographic ideals to the faithful.

BOTTOM UP: BLESSINGS AND OTHER SACRAMENTALS

The seven sacraments assure us of God's grace at important life moments such as baptism, marriage, the forgiveness of sins ... Alongside the sacraments, numerous concretely supportive aids were developing from below, designed to simplify life as a Christian. To distinguish them from the sacraments, they are called sacramentals. The main difference between sacraments and sacramentals is that in the former, the church assures believers of God's grace. This is not the case with sacramentals. Another difference, according to the church, is the origin of both: sacraments are instituted by Christ, while sacramentals are instituted by the church.²⁹

One of the most important forms of sacrament is blessings. The blessing of persons, objects and other things (such as food, vehicles and tools) are intended to light the way to salvation for people. Very importantly, the things that are blessed and thereby possess special power do not have that power by themselves but derive it from the person who blesses or consecrates. That person is seen as the bearer (in the case of saints) or mediator (in the case of priests and religious) of the power. What the persons gifted by God bless or consecrate (water, oil, fire, bread ...) has a healing effect.

One of the best-known sacramentals is holy water, but it is by no means the only efficacious water in the eyes of popular religiosity. Besides the liturgically consecrated water we know as holy water, water can be consecrated for a specific purpose, such as

²⁹ For the section on blessings, I appeal to Adolph Franz, *Die kirchlichen Benediktionen im Mittelalter*, Vol. 1, (Bonn: Verlag Nova & Vetera, 2006) [anastatic reprint of the original 1909 edition], 34-35, 79-85, 201, 228 and 393-407.

exorcism or healing. Such water plays a very important role in Christian religious worship. Some illustrations to clarify. Numerous saints' lives tell how water scooped by the saint has healing powers. Saint Brigida (an abbess from Scotland) performs numerous miracles with water she has blessed: she can use it to cure the sick, make the blind see, restore love between married couples and much more. Certain blessings of water take place on special days in honor of specific saints. Blasius water is good against human and animal diseases and candles blessed on his feast day help with sore throats.

Very popular is the blessing of salt. Already by nature, salt has been attributed a special, preservative power. People used consecrated salt for centuries to ward off devils and witches. Salt and bread were placed with children to protect them from demons. In fields and stables, it was sprinkled around to keep them safe from vermin.

Particularly in the sacramentals, the spirit of 'the people' has imposed itself on the church.³⁰ The church included a whole range of blessings in its own ritual repertoire. Blessing forms are found in various Roman ritual books and Roman missals. In 1984, a separate book was even published under the title *Rituale Romanum. De benedictionibus*.³¹ The book has been translated into many languages by numerous bishops' conferences.

The strongest example of influence from below is the development of dogma around Mary. This is of a different order than the development of a ritual or a prayer; it involves the affirmation of absolute truths of faith that would have come about under grassroots pressure. At issue are the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Assumption (1950). The official Magisterium resisted these creeds for centuries, but around the 1830s, (especially south European) popular piety breached the Church's Mariological minimalism. From that period onwards, Mary gained incredible theological interest and was given a place in

³⁰ Ibid., 13.

³¹ Manlio Sodi and Henri Delhougne, "Bénédiction," in *Dictionnaire encyclopédique de la liturgie. Volume 1*, eds., Domenico Sartore and Achille M. Triacca, (Turnhout: Brepols, 1992), 113-129, 120 and 124.

the most important documents that originated in Rome. Since the 1980s, these developments have led to renewed pressure - again from below - for Mary as mediatrix of all grace to be recognized as a dogma.³²

ON PERSISTENCE

Back to appearances. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries are something of a turning point. In circles of theologians and church authorities, critical distance and even great skepticism about the phenomenon of apparitions emerged. The influence of Protestantism, growing political laicism and developments in psychology may be no strange to this evolution. Just in this period, when apparitions seem to many intellectuals to belong to a bygone and superstitious era, Marian apparitions are *booming*. Just in the center of that modern world - Western Europe - a "Marian era" begins around 1830³³ with apparitions to an anonymous nun in Paris, who will not be identified as Catherine Labouré until forty years after her death. The apparitions in France become prototypes for most of the world's apparitions, particularly of the most high-profile apparition of the nineteenth century, that to Bernadette Soubirous in Lourdes.³⁴

Obviously, there has been a lot of research into this bizarre paradox: just now when technology, capitalism and rationality are starting to reign supreme, the number of Marian fanatics is rising rapidly. Research has shown that this belief among these people was not based on a naive misunderstanding, the need for the supernatural to provide relief from the miseries of everyday life or compensation for what they lacked here. The French peasants at La Salette or Lourdes were not all gullible, nor superstitious. A closer

³² Ernest Henau, "Hemelse Koningin, Oerbeeld van de Kerk, Model van de christen," in *Maria en de nieuwe evnagelisatie*, eds., Godfried Danneels, Ernest Henau, Wilfried Rossel, Filip Vanderheyden, (Averbode en Apeldoorn, Altiora, 1988), 29-50, 33-37.

³³ The phrase *Marian Age* is from Chris Maunder, "Apparitions of Mary," in *Mary. The Complete Resource*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss, (London and New York NY: Continuum, 2007), 424-457, 426.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 426.

look reveals their belief in apparitions to be a mix of age-old traditions and more recent, nineteenth-century cultural developments. To dismiss their beliefs as "irrational" is an anachronism of ours with our contemporary definitions of rationality. Nevertheless, that is what historians, who do not know what to do with the phenomenon of Lourdes and the like in an age of rationality, have done and still do.³⁵

Lourdes (and countless other places) shows that popular religiosity is ineradicable. Despite all technical and scientific advances, people remain firmly convinced that there is more between heaven and earth than just air. The Virgin Mary continues to be experienced as someone who intervenes in the lives of people who benevolently appeal to her. That was the case in the nineteenth century, and it remains unchanged at the beginning of the third millennium. And that belief is not limited to 'poor in spirit' or to marginal and vulnerable people. Like Lourdes from the beginning, intellectuals and well-to-do people also live in the firm belief that God engages with the world through numerous mediating agencies.

A CATHOLICISM *SINE GLOSSAE*?

So, what does all this say about the relationship between popular religiosity and official religion? There are numerous

³⁵ Coming to these extraordinary findings is Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age*, (London: Penguin, 1999), 357-358. Harris notes mildly ironically: "Understanding Lourdes requires a different approach and central to this, I believe, is a more sympathetic approach to the sustained appeal of the miraculous in religion, a topic which, on the whole, historians of the modern era have been wary of examining. While medievalists happily dwell on the supernatural [] historians of the nineteenth century are usually ill at ease with, if not actually repelled by, the equivalent phenomena in their own period. The magical incantations of the peasant world, the pious murmurings of the female devotees of the Sacred Heart and clerical communion with the Virgin, let alone miraculous cures, are usually seen as little more than superstitious remnants on the road to extinction." (12) And the irony, which I think is justified, does not end there: "It is hardly surprising then, that mainstream historians have left Lourdes to Catholic Scholars, unable to approach such a phenomenon with the same anthropological pleasure that the flickering remains of peasant folklore and popular religiosity - small scale, communitarian and an object of nostalgia - arouse." (13)

expressions in academic literature to express the contradiction between the two, and in all languages:

<i>Foi populaire</i>	<i>Foi savante</i>
Popular Religion	Elite religion
<i>Persönliche Frömmigkeit</i>	<i>Offizielle Religion</i>
Living religion	Prescribed religion

They all express contradiction and, consciously or unconsciously, perpetuate antagonism. Even the term 'folk religiosity' expresses a form of inferiority. Let it be immediately clear that folk in 'folk religiosity' does not refer to the lower social classes in which this religion would be practiced. 'Folk' is not a socio-economic concept but refers to a socio-historical practice; a way in which people concretely live out their religion.³⁶ I want to stick to the old concept of folk religiosity, where 'folk' does not refer to a particular class, but the entire people of God.³⁷

Incidentally, in the reality of everyday life, there is no flawless separation between popular religiosity and official religion. One of the leading French historians of popular religiosity, Pierre Boglioni, notes:

If we make the simplest effort to identify with this craftsman or peasant, we can easily see the multifaceted variety of his religious world. The sermons of his parish priest are just as much a part of it as the tales of the pilgrim returning from Santiago, the sacraments he

³⁶ Analogously, the reliance on fortune-tellers and other mediums is not a consequence of poor education or belonging to a lower social class, but rather depends on poorly controlled fears in all walks of life: Roger Lapointe, "Divination savante et populaire," in *Foi populaire. Foi savante, Cogitatio Fidei*, 87, ed. Jean-Marie R. Tillard, (Paris, Les éditions du cerf, 1976): 73-91, 74. There has been a whole literature on *lived religion* since the publication of Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). One also reads this view in Thierry Wanegffelden, "Acculturation ecclésiastique et religion populaire." *Hommage à l'auteur du concept de "profanisation," in Mélanges à la mémoire de Michel Péronnet*, (Montpellier: Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2007), 259-275.

³⁷ See also de le Martinière, *La piété populaire*, 78.

receives just as much as the talismans he carries around with him, the prayers he learns in church just as much as the ritual formulas for warding off locusts, and the Corpus Christi processions just as much as the little pilgrimages to the local springs, traditionally known to bring rain.³⁸

A Belgian specialist in historical religious folk culture, Jan Art, expresses it thus :

The mere description of the ideal-typical and actual religious experience of the people and elite is a difficult task. One usually encounters ever-changing mixtures in history: the religious experience of pastors is not always as 'clerical-elitist' as one might expect, and the docility of the people towards church directives is often a façade behind which the most diverse motivations and senses can be hidden.³⁹

Focusing on the distinction between folk religion and elite religion risks forgetting that neither are monocultures. Within popular religiosity and within the hierarchical church, there are also diverse strands. One of the most recent examples of the latter are the so-called progressive and conservative tendencies at the Second Vatican Council.

There is a second problem regarding the recognition of popular religiosity as a phenomenon. Not only is there the antagonism cited above in which the elite takes it out on the *vulgus* anyway. For a long time, scholarly research has disregarded an equivalence by studying the phenomenon of folk devotion in circles of ethnologists, folklorists and anthropologists. It was never a

³⁸ Pierre Boglioni, "Pour l'étude de la religion populaire au Moyen Age: le problème des sources," 96.

³⁹ Jan Art, "Clerus en volksreligie in Vlaanderen," 100. In the same book, there is an article that completely confirms this thesis for the situation in the Netherlands: Willem Frijhoff, "Vraagtekens bij het vroegmodern kersteningsoffensief," in *Religieuze volkscultuur. De spanning tussen de voorgeschreven orde en de geleefde praktijk*, eds., Gerard Rooijackers and Theo van der Zee (Nijmegen, SUN), 71-98.

serious item for theologians. As a result, popular religiosity is laden with terms such as irrational, superstitious, magical, pagan, amoral ... The seriousness of the phenomenon becomes entirely subordinate to a romantic-traditional portrait of the religion of our ancestors. Review works of church history also does not infrequently lack a chapter on the religious experience of ordinary people.

The solution to the conflict between popular religiosity and church-desired religion can be resolved by language game theory. It involves two closely related language games, a commonly spoken language and a dialect. One language does not exist without the other; one does not grow and change without the other. Language grows organically. There will never be a pure Christianity. Believers will always appropriate it in their own way and that appropriation will not always be in the good graces of the hierarchy. However, the Middle Ages have shown that a third way is possible. The interaction between the two led to tensions, but also to new things. However, real conflicts only emerged after the hierarchical church started to 'order' and discipline the lived religion of the people.

There are lessons to be learned from the Middle Ages. What if we replace antagonism with dialogue? After all, the wall between official religion and popular religiosity is porous. By dialogue, I do not mean polite conversation, but an evangelical way of dealing with a dialectical field of tension. After all, the two phenomena are two sides of one coin. One came into being along with the other. According to historian Pierre Maraval, liturgy as we know it originated in the fourth century, along with the emergence of the church building as we know it today. And simultaneously with that genesis, the phenomenon of pilgrimage and related devotional practices emerged in the fourth century.⁴⁰

The main enabling condition for a full-fledged dialogue is the recognition of the equality of the interlocutors, and this is where things get difficult. If popular religiosity is considered not

⁴⁰ Pierre Maraval, "Motivations et pratiques des pèlerins des premiers siècles," in *Liturgie de pèlerinage et piété populaire*, ed. Gilles Drouin (Paris: Salvator, 2018), 67-84.

only subordinate but even inferior compared to the official religion, dialogue cannot happen. Christianity is a house with many rooms. French cardinal Jean Daniélou, in an article eloquently titled *Piété mariale des marginaux*, compares the equal recognition of popular religiosity with that of other religions:

One of the great discoveries of contemporary missiology is the need to respect the religious character of each people: what we call Christianity here is not Christianity in its purest form, but Western Christianity, in other words, Christianity that has taken the values of Greece, Rome and Gaul and Christianized them. It would be a huge mistake to identify our Christianity with THE Christianity. There is a unity of faith but diversity in its expressions, a diversity whose main characteristic is that faith must be expressed in each culture according to the specific forms of religious feeling of that culture.⁴¹

A recognition of equality respects the fact that “Christian folk religious people” do not have the experience of being superstitious or pagan at all.⁴² If asked about their religion, it is unadulterated Catholicism. It is the church hierarchy, and it is scholars who make the distinction.

Recognition of equivalence by the church is out of the question for now. Church documents after the Second Vatican Council clearly show great appreciation for the phenomenon, but a ‘but’ keeps popping up. Eventually the *piae exercitiae* must fold completely to the liturgy, popular piety to orthodoxy. The consequences are enormous. We are lucky that phenomena and rituals like relic veneration, apparitions, blessings or the Stations of

⁴¹ Jean Daniélou, “Piété mariale des marginaux,” *Cahiers Marials*, no. 59 (1 September 1967):212 quoted by Robert Pannet, *Le catholicisme 30 ans après “La France pays de mission,”* (Paris: Editions du centurion,² 1974), 260.

⁴² This situation is nicely highlighted Ann Verlinden, *Het ongewone alledaagse. Over zwarte katten, horoscopen, miraculeuze genezingen*, (Leuven, Acco, 1999). See especially the portraits of Rosa, Mrs Vercruysse and Hildergard, 30-43, 70-82 and 114-129.

the Cross and so many others originated in the Middle Ages.⁴³ Most would have stood no chance after Trent and certainly after Vatican II. That is the reality. It will take a lot from the church to recognize popular religiosity as a liturgy in its own right.⁴⁴ Even if the church is not prepared to do so, it will still have to live with the distinct identity of popular religiosity that responds to a spontaneous, deeply religious *fondness* in every human being.⁴⁵

Real dialogue demands that the interlocutors do not necessarily have to agree after the conversation. A dialogue is not a meeting that demands a solution at the end. A dialogue is a process where change - in this case - can take several decades.⁴⁶ The hierarchical church cannot possibly be expected to approve everything that happens in the field of popular religiosity. It is impossible to deny that in the field of popular religiosity there are rituals taking place that are downright magical from an ecclesiastical point of view, sharing points of faith that are defined as superstitious. It is part of the church's mission to bring people

⁴³ The history of the Stations of the Cross is interesting. Indeed, it would have had no chance now because five of the 14 stations (namely Jesus falling under it three times and the encounter with his mother and with Veronica) are not Biblical. For this reason, on Good Friday 1991, Pope John-Paul II made the Stations of the Cross completely Biblical by taking out the apocryphal stations and inserting more Biblically based ones. His - what he called - Biblical Way of the Cross has not been an unqualified success at the grassroots level and has not yet been able to replace the old stations. On reliquary worship: Julia Szirmai, "La critique médiévale de la vénération des reliques du *De pignioribus sanctorum* de Guibert de Nogent au *Traicté des reliques* de Calvin," in *Formes et figures de religieux au Moyen Âge*, Collection "Littéraire," ed. Pierre Nobel (Paris: Presses Universitaires Franc-Comtoises, 2002), 127-140, 128.

⁴⁴ A look at the past immediately shows that the Church owes much to pressure from below, and this does not just involve rituals, but, for example, numerous elements from the Liturgical Movement, from ecumenism and social doctrine Jean-Marie R. Tillard, "Sensus fidelium. Réflexion théologique," in *Foi populaire. Foi savante, Cogitatio Fidei*, 87, ed. Jean-Marie R. Tillard (Paris: Les éditions du cerf, 1976): 9-40, 10.

⁴⁵ Peloux and Pian, *Les religiosités populaires. Archaisme ou modernité?*, 24.

⁴⁶ One form of successful dialogue seems to me to be the situation of some popular religious festivals in Spain. See Marlène Albert-Llorca, "Renouveau de la religion locale en Espagne," in *Identités religieuses en Europe*, eds. Grace Davie and Dianèle Hervieu-Léger Recherches, (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1996), 235-252.

closer to God through orthodoxy and orthopraxy. It does this through many avenues, including putting Christ back at the centre, for example by renaming the names of some feasts (Candlemas officially became the Lord's Mission in the Temple).⁴⁷

From the church, however, it can be expected to take into account its original followers. Jesus chooses his followers from among Galilean fishermen (Mt 4:18-22 par.) and constantly addresses "the people (*ho ochlos*).” He addresses people in parables and comparisons drawn from the simple lives of those people (see Mt 13). He even gets into entanglements with the notables of his time (Jn 7:48-49). The earliest church spread almost entirely among ordinary people. The Christians of Corinth may have belonged to the same low social circles as their fellow believers in Palestine (1 Cor 1:28-30). According to Tertullian, already discussed above (*Adversus Praxean*), the majority of those who have always believed (*major semper credentium pars*) are made up of *simplices*, not to say unrepentant and ignorant people (*ne dixerim imprudentes et idiotae*). Celsus, antiquity's greatest intellectual enemy of Christianity,

⁴⁷ Tillard, "Sensus fidelium. Réflexion théologique," 25-26. Once seems to have been the greater confidence in the *sensus fidelium* of the whole people of God and not only of the magisterium. Thomas Aquinas counts among the virtues of the gift of faith the sense of discernment, even without training, as a virtuous person always knows what the right thing is (*De veritate*, in an article on the need to explicitly adhere to every article of faith). And Cardinal Newman brilliantly demonstrated the role de *phronéma* of the faithful in the conflict with Arianism at the very moment when the *ecclesia docens* fell into error. This is, of course, a very optimistic view. Truth develops in the dialectical process between various strains and factions in the people of God. The famous passage from Newman reads as follows: "The Episcopate, whose action was so prompt and concordant at Nicea on the rise of Arianism, did not, as a class or order of men, play a good part in the troubles consequent upon the Council; and the laity did. The Catholic people, in the length and breadth of Christendom, were the obstinate champions of Catholic truth, and the bishops were not. Of course, there were great and illustrious exceptions... But overall, taking a wide view of the history, we are obliged to say that the governing body of the Church came up short, and the governed were pre-eminent in faith, zeal, courage and constancy. This is a very remarkable fact: but there is a moral in it. []" John Henry Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century*, (London: Longmans, Green and C^o 1897), Appendix, note V, 445-446.

constantly speaks contemptuously of the mess of low character that Christians are.⁴⁸

Popular religiosity should not cut ties with official church authorities. An ecclesiastical *placet* offers guarantees of a longer future. It happens that popular praxis deviates so much from ecclesiastical praxis that there is hardly any Christianity left. People then not only practice things that no longer have anything to do with Christianity, they also believe things that are miles away from Christ's message. In our regions, this area of tension is often not so bad and hardly comes into open conflict, but in Latin America - a Mecca of popular religiosity - it is different. When Christian popular religiosity is mixed with voodoo practices asking saints to kill opponents, we are far from the Gospel message.

Real dialogue consists of keeping the interlocutors in tension. In time, new things grow out of this. Only in this way does the liturgy of the church remain safeguarded from traditionalism and new things can grow out of it. Only in this way will the focus that liturgy should have on life remain safeguarded and not degenerate into ritualism and externality, something Christ and Paul warn against (Mt 15:1-9 and 10-20; Mk 7:1-23; Acts 15:1-35; Gal 4:9-11 and 1 Cor 8-10). And popular religiosity can fall ill in the same bed. There, too, the danger of ritualism lurks around the corner. The efficacy of a ritual does not depend on its precise execution. That is magic.

Anyone who wants to know what church bodies have to offer to popular religiosity should take the *Directory in hand*. However, the church documents barely speak about what popular religiosity has to offer. Hence this non-exhaustive enumeration of some important features.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ References and more examples in Gilles Langevin, "Christianisme populaire et pureté de la foi," in *Foi populaire. Foi savante*, ed. Jean-Marie R. Tillard, *Cogitatio Fidei*, 87, (Paris:Les éditions du cerf, 1976), 149-166, 152-153.

⁴⁹ I found some features in Antonio Mastantuono, "La pietà popolare da problema a risorsa," in *La pietà popolare. Folklore, fede, e liturgia*, eds. Antonio Mastantuono, Cammini di Chiesa (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 2015), 7-27, 12-13.

CONTACT - IMMEDIACY - SENSIBILITY

Popular religiosity is very close at hand, closely related to the image of Jacob fighting all night with the angel of God. That story expresses an incredibly vivid and direct connection to the sacred that is not entirely alien to our everyday experience.⁵⁰ Life is experienced as fundamentally sacramental: it breathes in the sacred. Reflection on religion begins during the experience of everyday life. God, Christ, Mary, saints, angels ... are omnipresent. They are contemplated in churches, but they are also in the living room, in the car, in little chapels beside roads ... No reflexive, theological mediation is needed to get in touch with the transcendent; it is "present."

The immediacy is already reflected in one of the main motivations of the oldest pilgrims' accounts (4^{de} -5^{de} century). The pilgrims want to see the holy places. They want to see where Christ walked, where famous martyrs are buried, where and how living saints live. They absolutely want to see it to better understand, to better grasp what the Bible tells. Church Father Jerome (*Praefatio in libros Paralipomenon*) uses a beautiful analogy: just as we must go to Athens to better understand Greek historians, one knows better what Scripture is talking about when contemplating the ruins of its ancient cities with one's own eyes in Judea. Examples abound in ancient literature regarding the emotional response evoked by the real visit to such holy places. Theodoretus of Cyrrhus notes, "Those who come for spectacle return raised in divine things." (*Historia Religiosa*)⁵¹

Besides seeing, pilgrims want to touch: the site, the relics and the saintly image are touched, embraced, kissed and if necessary, even punished. Seeing is usually accompanied by

⁵⁰ The connection between Jacob and popular religiosity is from Roberto Tagliaferri, *Il cristianesimo "pagano" della religiosità popolare*, (Padua: Edizioni Massaggero, 2014), 274.

⁵¹ Precise references and more examples in Pierre Maraval, "Motivations et pratiques des pèlerins des premiers siècles," 67-77. See also Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage, 30 (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

physical contact. To a large extent, praying is also touching. In the oldest pilgrim account yet discovered, Egeria's journey to Palestine, this female pilgrim around 380 bears witness to what happens in Jerusalem on Good Friday. The bishop holds out a piece of the Holy Cross wood to the pilgrims, which the latter in turn touches and kisses. She adds how it once happened that a pilgrim bit a piece out of the Wood of the Cross in order to steal it.⁵²

The immediacy explains why there is seemingly so little place for Christ in popular religiosity. Christ is situated more on the side of God than on the side of men. What popular religiosity does identify with is the humanity of Christ in the manger and on the cross. The mediators par excellence remains Mary and the saints with whom immediate contact is more feasible. Mary is the most "popular" for some reasons: she is the mother of Jesus, she is mother *tout court*, she is one of us.⁵³

Immediacy also has its limits and sometimes mediation is even necessary. The faithful cannot/will not bless the objects themselves and find that they "work" only when it is done by a priest clothed with the necessary "power" to do so. Medals, rosaries, figurines of saints ... work better when they are blessed. That example shows that popular religiosity cannot possibly be thought of separately from the official church.

RITUALITY - CORPORALITY - INCARNATION

Praxis goes for orthodoxy. Cardinal Godfried Danneels' wrote a small booklet on the phenomenon, entitled *Folk Religion. Believing with hands and feet*. In the words of Serge Bonnet: "For many of us, faith is only possible through custom."⁵⁴ Ideally, rituals should not be perceived as novelty but should be traditional. Old and traditional take on the aura of active and vigorous. Crucially, mediation only works when the rituals are performed at a certain time, with certain words, in a certain context, with certain objects.

⁵² Ibid., 78-79.

⁵³ de la Martinière, *La piété populaire*, 106-110.

⁵⁴ Serge Bonnet, *Défense du catholicisme populaire*, (Paris: Les éditions du cerf, 2016), 523.

The latter arouses suspicion among official church authorities. It makes them think of magic. But the sacraments are nevertheless subject to similar requirements (certain words, spoken by certain persons, with certain ritual actions and objects such as water or oil ...⁵⁵

Concurrent with this rituality and closely related to it is corporality. The sacred is mediated by tactility. Hence, so many objects are central: statues, prayer cards, blessed objects, all kinds of prayer cords, medals...Folk devotion has a strong need for visible signs. Materiality is also used in the official liturgy to make the spiritual present in its absence. Materiality makes it all more concrete and comprehensible. In popular religiosity, this materiality plays an even more important role, also because spiritual powers are attributed to the objects themselves.

We already find traces of this tactility in the Gospels, where Jesus heals the woman who has been suffering from bleeding for 12 years (Mt 9:19-22; Mk 5:24-34; Lk 8:42-48). It is a very special story in our context because the woman, in the immediate vicinity of Jesus, does something magical, something superstitious. She tries to touch the hem of Jesus' garment in the greatest secrecy. And then something miraculous happens. Jesus asks, "Who touched me?" He does not reproach her but makes time for her. Jesus calls her "My daughter" and sends her away healed.⁵⁶

ASKING AND BEGGING

The direct connection provides something else: pragmatism.⁵⁷ Just as it is the most normal thing for children to ask their parents for anything, it is the most normal thing for problems and questions to be submitted to heaven. It is only since the Second Vatican Council that many 'elitist believers' have thought that supplication is obsolete. Ideal prayer honors God and does not assail God with questions and wishes. Ideal prayer is praying for

⁵⁵ de la Martinière, *La piété populaire*, 138. See also Peloux and Pian, *Les religiosités populaires. Archaisme ou modernité?*. 24.

⁵⁶ A brief analysis of this story can be found in *ibid.*, 123-125.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

prayer's sake. Before that council, however, asking was almost synonymous with praying. One prayed primarily to ask. If one were to ask one of the greatest theologians of all time - Thomas Aquinas - what prayer is for, he would answer, "to ask." For this, he invoked Scripture. Jesus himself asked his Father things countless times, and Jesus himself asks what he can do for people.⁵⁸ The oldest pilgrim stories make mention of that begging and asking. Pilgrims ask for spiritual as well as material favors.⁵⁹

Asking and imploring have a negative, utilitarian connotation and have made popular religiosity seem purely compensatory, but Serge Bonnet, who has examined 140,000 such *vota scripta*, comes to a different conclusion⁶⁰ :

The quiet river of prayer of the Christian people is an unmistakable testimony to a spirituality of good taste and delicate fraternal charity. It reflects, not an opium devotion, but the seriousness, sometimes dramatic, of daily life in working-class circles and the moving fraternal communion in suffering.⁶¹

In popular religiosity, people turn to Our Lady without wondering what virginity or immaculateness refer to, but because they can confidently turn to a mother with their questions. When they make a sign of the cross, people do not dwell on the mystery

⁵⁸ For example, in the story of Bartimeus (Mk 10.51). For Thomas: Joris Geldhof and Hans Geybels, "Aquinas" prayer as *locus theologicus*, in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 95 (2019):213-218.

⁵⁹ Maraval, "Motivations et pratiques des pèlerins des premiers siècles," 79-84.

⁶⁰ Bonnet (*Prières secrètes des Français d'aujourd'hui*, 272) anecdotally depicts the difference between "elitists and folk" using *vota scripta*: "First of all, there are those who deplore what they see as overly self-serving requests. Underneath 'Our Lady of La Salette, give us stones to build with,' one visitor does not hesitate to give a material meaning to this prayer and writes: 'Our Lady of La Salette, make people understand the true meaning of prayer so that they will no longer pray to you for stones to build with or a car.'" (own translation)

⁶¹ This summary by Bonnet is from Fernand Boulard, "La religion populaire dans le débat de la pastorale contemporaine," in *La religion populaire: Approches historiques*, ed. Bernard Plongeron, Bibliothèque Beauchesne: Religions, Société, Politique 2 (Paris: Editions Beauchesne, 1976), 27-49, 35.

of Trinity but realize that they are making a powerful sign on which to place their hopes, and which will offer them protection. Asking is free.⁶²

CELEBRATION

It is striking how in many cases devotion is linked to celebration. The rite is often an occasion for celebration. Church Mass culminates in the fair. Again, Cardinal Danneels expresses it plastically:

The church service may be shorter than the feast that follows, which can be long, but it is like psalm singing in the Liturgy of the Hours: each psalm is preceded by its antiphon. Then the whole psalm follows. That antiphon is also short, but it does set the tone in which the psalm is sung and indicates its theme. [] Celebration is relaxation, carefreeness, joy, forgetting and not having to think about tomorrow yet. In the church service, everything is arranged, framed and determined. At the feast, everything overflows, breaks at the seams, right down to transgression. But the source where emotion springs is the Church.⁶³

Research shows that when the aspect of celebration is separated from devotional practice, popular religiosity devitalizes and may even disappear.⁶⁴

All these features make popular religiosity a powerful engine for evangelizing rather than always wanting to evangelize popular religiosity. In my view, it is an aberration to regard church

⁶² de la Martinière, *La piété populaire*, 198.

⁶³ Godfried Kardinaal Danneels, *Volksreligie: geloven met handen en voeten*, (Mechelen: Persdienst Aartsbisdom, 2008), 18. The quote shows once again the entanglement between popular religiosity and official church practice. One cannot exist without the other while both still function according to their own logic.

⁶⁴ Serge Bonnet, *Histoire de l'ermitage et du pèlerinage de Saint-Rouin*, Nîmes, Editions Lacour, 1956, p. 102.

liturgy as the only pure form of liturgy and valorize the rest as deviant excrescences.⁶⁵

CONCLUSION

My aim with this contribution is to have another look at the debate between popular and elitist or official religion. Whatever pair of terms one uses for the phenomena, they all have their flaws, but what is meant is clear. In literature - theological, anthropological or sociological - the two are drawn apart and even in opposition. When this happens in theology, I find it regrettable, because the two are two sides of a coin. If one side wants to obliterate the other, there is no longer a medal.

Even though I may have upgraded popular religiosity to such an extent that it looks as if official religion is wrong in correcting popular religiosity, that was by no means my intention. I remain keenly aware that one cannot exist without the other. Two sides of the same coin. Peaceful coexistence is possible only within a framework of dialogue. In dialogue, the interlocutors remain themselves. They may not be held accountable by the other party, but they must try to explain their point of view to the other. In real dialogue, the interlocutors change their meaning and behavior during the dialogue, but very slowly.

Remaining oneself in this context means this: people cannot possibly require the magisterium to agree to heteropraxis. The magisterium may well consider that some customs and rituals in popular religiosity are evidence of magic or superstition. It is part of its core mission to incorporate popular religiosity into the liturgy. It is its duty to guide the faithful towards a spiritually and evangelically lived Christian identity. But, forcing people to assimilate their beliefs and practices to other beliefs and practices shows little tact and even goes against Christ himself. And, popular religiosity must remain itself: believing with hands and feet, praying and celebrating, using all the senses, seeking answers close to life,

⁶⁵ With this, I follow the views of the only author who is entirely in my line, namely de la Martinière, *La piété populaire*, 15.

drawing the sacred into everyday life and so on. In this way, popular religiosity can provide oil in the radar work of a religion.

Close study of the Catholic phenomenon shows that the two are very much related. Liturgists will say that the characteristics I just attributed to practiced faith are also present in preached faith, and they are right. Indeed, at first glance it seems that in popular religiosity more is asked for than praised, but on closer inspection much is asked for another person. What is wrong with that? And what harm is there in asking God something for oneself or one's family?

I like to give the last word to Serge Bonnet, the great scholar of popular religiosity in France. He has studied people's questions to God and the saints most attentively and lovingly. I can end with no one more beautiful and respectful than him:

You only must close your eyes to see them: the old lady with her hat crumpled like an autumn cloud, the fiancé deserted by his love, the mother worried about her child, the unemployed man obsessed with finding bread for his family. Behind them is the procession of all the tired, all the crippled, all the obscure crucified of everyday life. [] Perhaps they sense, in the half-light of wavering trust or from the depths of drunken distress, that God loves them because they are poor. In their groping, the poor of money, but also the poor of education and even intelligence, perceive that they are the first to God, because they are the last or penultimate among men. They make no mistake when they come to sign their names, kneel down and hold out their hands to a mother carrying a child in her arms.⁶⁶

Hans Geybels

⁶⁶ Serge Bonnet, *Prières secrètes des Français d'aujourd'hui*, p. 7.