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Jesus Christ – Living Rule of Christian life. Ecumenical Dimension of *sequela/imitatio Christi*

Abstract

The ideas of *sequela Christi* and *imitatio Christi* as a rule of Christian life are all rooted in the words and attitude of Jesus and the Apostles, and then expressed in the teaching of the Church, from the Fathers onwards. They have a great ecumenical importance as a *regula vitae* for all Christians. In the new millennium, we must show the world the «whole» Christ in His fullness of truth: in the power of the baptismal grace, with the joyful boldness of the Spirit, in ways renewed in methods and zeal. The ecumenical dimension of this following/imitation Christ rises from his Trinitarian, Christological, pneumatological and baptismal foundation in the perspective of the evangelization.

Keywords: baptism, ecumenism, Jesus Christ, following, rule, imitation, Christian life.

Jezus Chrystus – Żywa Reguła chrześcijańskiego życia. Ekumeniczny wymiar *sequela/imitatio Christi*

Streszczenie

Idee *sequela Christi* oraz *imitatio Christi* jako reguły chrześcijańskiego życia są zakorzenione w słowach i postawie Jezusa i Apostołów, a potem wyrażone w nauczaniu Kościoła, począwszy od jego Ojców. Mają wielkie znaczenie ekumeniczne jako *regula vitae* dla wszystkich chrześcijan. W nowym tysiącleciu musimy ukazywać światu „całego” Chrystusa w Jego pełnej prawdzie: w mocy łaski chrztu, z radosną śmiałością Ducha, w sposób odnowiony w metodach i w zapale. Ekumeniczny wymiar tego naśladowania Chrystusa (podążania za Nim i upodobnienia do Niego) wyrasta z jego trynitarnego, chrystologicznego, pneumatologicznego i chrzcielnego fundamentu w perspektywie ewangelizacji.

Słowa kluczowe: chrzest, ekumenizm, Jezus Chrystus, naśladowanie, reguła, upodobnienie, życie chrześcijańskie.

Imitation plays an important role in human life. Every child learns (things good and bad) primarily by imitating the parents, but does not do so slavishly. The aesthetic concept of imitation (Gr. *mimesis*), described by Plato (*Ion*, *Republic*) and developed by Aristotle (*Poetics*), did not mean copying, but creative imi-

tation of reality through art. In this way, Horace thought that the poet is like a bee collecting nectar from different flowers and processing it into its own, unique honey. The category of *mimesis* found a place in contemporary philosophical reflection (e.g. Erich Auerbach, René Girard).

Human life is also directed by a number of laws and rules. Similarly, the life of faith. “The rule of faith” (*regula fidei*) – as it was called by Fathers of the Church – the normative content of the Christian faith, which later evolved into more elaborate confession of faith (*credo*), together with the canon of Scripture, marked the boundaries of orthodoxy. The ideas of *sequela Christi* and *imitatio Christi* as a rule of Christian life are all rooted in the words and attitude of Jesus and the Apostles, and then expressed in the teaching of the Church, from the Fathers onwards. They have a great ecumenical importance as a *regula vitae* for all Christians. Jesus Christ is Living Rule of Christian life.

1. *Sequela – imitatio – transformatio (conformatio)*

The ideas: *sequela Christi* (following Christ) and *imitatio Christi* (configuration to Christ) – and even *conformatio Christi* (Christ-like shape) or *transformatio in Christum* (transformation in Christ) – overlap, although they express different contents¹.

“Follow me” – Jesus says to the first disciples. In the Jewish tradition the word “go” meant respect and obedience of the disciple to his master, but to follow the Rabbi of Nazareth meant not only taking his instructions, but also accompanying him to his sacrifice (Mk 8,34; Mt 26,24). St. Peter makes this the basic theme of his First Letter (1 Peter 2,21): Christ left you an example, “so that you should follow in his footsteps”. For Paul the Apostle following Christ meant becoming like Him in the mystery of his death and resurrection, which begins in Baptism (Rom 6,3-5). Conversion to Christ is the desire of the Apostle concerning his disciples (Gal 4,19); He himself is an example of this (Ga 2,19n). The imitation of Christ, understanding as the dynamic “sojourn” *in sinu Trinitatis*, becomes distinct especially in the Johannine Gospel².

St. Ignatius of Antioch († 107), in the Letter to the Philadelphians (7,2), writes: “Imitate Jesus Christ, as he his Father” (*Imitatores estote Jesu Christi, ut et ipse*

¹ Cf. G. STRZELCZYK, „Nowe życie w Chrystusie” – naśladowanie czy upodobnienie?, „Wrocławski Przegląd Teologiczny” 23 (2015) nr 2, 193–194, 201.

² M. CAREIRA DAS NEVES, „Weź swój krzyż i naśladowuj mnie”. Współczesny sens ascezy, „Communio” 13 (1993) nr 5, 15–16; P. CODA, *Naśladowanie Chrystusa jako przebywanie w Trójcy Świętej według Ewangelii Janowej*, in: L. BALTER (chief ed.), *Duchowość chrześcijańska*, Poznań 1995, 83–107.

Patris ipsius). For St. Augustine, following Christ will mean becoming like him in the fullness of love, in service and witness, of which martyrs gave the supreme example (Homily 84.4). St. Francis of Assisi captivates by *sequela Christi*. He does not use the concept of *imitatio*, but his spiritual son, St. Bonaventure, in his *Letter about following Christ*, uses the Latin wording, which became famous thanks to *devotio moderna*, especially through the work (probably) of Thomas à Kempis *De imitatione Christi* (c. 1414–1425)³.

The *devotio moderna* was a reaction to nominalistic mysticism, focusing on the intricate speculations about the unity of God. The starting point of the *devotio moderna* is as follows: the true spiritual life develops by imitating Christ and reflecting his holy humanity. Meditation on the mysteries of Christ's life becomes the basis for the "spiritual exercises", first by García de Cisneros (1500), abbot of the Benedictine Montserrat, then by St. Ignatius of Loyola (1522–1523). Inasmuch as for Cisneros the centre of Christian meditation was the Passion of Christ, for Ignatius of Loyola it is His resurrection, which gives meaning to all the mysteries of Christ's life⁴.

To *sequela Christi* encouraged precursors and Fathers of Reformation – J. Wycliffe, J. Hus, M. Luther, J. Calvin. Luther and Protestants in the polemics with extremes of mediaeval *imitatio Christi* affirmed that Christ was more "the gift" which one ought to accept in the faith, than "the model" which one ought to imitate⁵. However, this reservation has no absolute character. For example, in the sermon of Luther on 2. Sunday after Easter (to Jn 10,11-16) we read:

This means to imitate the example of Christ, so that every Christian also be a good shepherd. Though I cannot deliver others from the death and the sin with my death, because this is a sole act of one right shepherd, Jesus Christ, as above you heard, but after all I can give my life that others be lead to the God's word and to the knowledge of Christ by a such example⁶.

The Second Vatican Council brings together all the expressions on the imitation of Christ: the obligation to be conformed to Christ (*imitatio*) is the task of all of his disciples. The Church is also pleased that in himself there are many men and women who pursue him "more closely" (*pressius sequuntur*), "show more

³ M. CAREIRA DAS NEVES, „*Weź swój krzyż i naśladowuj mnie*”, 17–18.

⁴ L. ROCHA E MELO, *Tajemnice życia Jezusa w szesnastowiecznych i wcześniejszych szkołach duchowych*, „*Communio*” 23 (2003) nr 1, 28–32.

⁵ Z. PAŁUBSKA, *Naśladowanie Chrystusa*, in: E. GIGILEWICZ (chief ed.), *Encyklopedia katolicka*, vol. 13, Lublin 2009, 787; R. CANTALAMESSA, *Tajemnica Przemienienia*, Kraków 2002 (orig. ed. *Mistero della trasfigurazione*, Ancora 1999), 105–106.

⁶ M. LUTER, *Postylla domowa*, Bielsko-Biała 1993, 313.

clearly” (*clarius demonstrant*) and “conform themselves more fully” (*plenius conforment*) to Christ (*Lumen gentium* 42).

Institutes of consecrated life expressed its program of discipleship, in accordance with a specific charisma” in their rules. The coenobitic rule of St. Pachomius (287–347) is considered the oldest. Great contribution to the life of faith but also to the life of culture has been brought by the rules of St. Basil (IV c.), St. Augustine (IV–V.) brought, and especially – for Western civilization – the rule of St. Benedict (VI.), which begins with the words: “Listen, my son ...”. Hearing (*audire*) and heeding (*ob-audire*) to the voice of God go hand in hand. The lawmaker of the Carmelite Order, Bl. Albert Avogadro (of Vercelli), patriarch of Jerusalem, called his rule, developed between 1205–1209, the *Formula of life* (*Formula vitae*) and it starts by saying that “everyone, regardless of the state and chosen lifestyle, should continue to obey Jesus Christ.” From its beginnings, the Gospel of Christ consecrated life has inspired consecrated life. In the twelfth century, Stephen of Muret, founder of the Order of Grandmont, advised his brothers: “If anyone asks you what profession, what rule or which Order you are from, respond that you are from the first and most important Christian rule, that is the Gospel, source and origin of all the rules, since there is no other rule but the Gospel of Christ.” For St. Francis of Assisi the Rule is “the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ”⁷. For example, against this background, St. Vincent Pallotti (1795–1850), founder of the Union and Society of Catholic Apostolate, places this note: “(...) as a basic foundation should be adopted, forever and for life, as something essential, this what in the Pious Association with the entire consciousness will be called the «Main Chapter» [*capitolo di Fondamento*] and «Living Rule» [*Regola viva*] of the Pious Union. (...)”⁸. Therefore, not the *Rule of Life*, but the *Living Rule*: Jesus Christ – the Divine Model is to be followed.

In recent times, this optics was confirmed by the Second Vatican Council. It states that the ultimate norm of the religious life is the “following of Christ set forth in the Gospels” [*Christi sequela in Evangelio proposita*], therefore all institutes should regard this norm as their “highest rule” (*Perfectione caritatis* 2).

⁷ KONGREGACJA INSTYTUTÓW ŻYCIA KONSEKROWANEGO I STOWARZYSZEŃ ŻYCIA APOSTOLSKIEGO, *Rozpoznawajcie. Do osób konsekrowanych podążających szlakiem znaków Bożych*, Warszawa 2014, 44–48 (nr 8).

⁸ V. PALLOTTI, *Opere Complete*, ed. F. MOCCIA, Roma 1964nn, vol. II, 540. This rule of Pallotti was remained by the pope Benedict XVI during celebrations of the Day of the Consecrated Life, 2 February 2007, with rules of St. Benedict, St. Dominic, St. Francis, St. Clare and St. Aloysius Orione.

2. *Living Rule* for today

Every spiritual community wants to show in the Church and the world some aspect of the unfathomable riches of the person and activity of Christ⁹. Various vocations of Christians are like rays of the one light of Christ “brightly visible on the countenance of the Church” (*Lumen gentium* 1): the laity reflect the mystery of the Incarnate Word – Alpha and Omega of the world; those who are ordained are a living image of the Christ – Head and Shepherd; the religious state faithfully imitates and makes present in the Church the form of life which “Christ proposed to His disciples” [and], “as the Son of God, accepted at entering this world” (*Lumen gentium* 44). We can ask: what is necessary especially for today?

2.1. Show the world the “whole” Christ...

Father Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap. stated that “In the new millennium, we must show the world the «whole» Christ in His fullness of truth (...)”¹⁰. Why? Despite the accepted definition of the Council of Chalcedon (451) two basic Christological models, propagated in two ancient theological schools, Alexandria and Antioch, have not disappeared. The Eastern Church put in the centre of the “Christ of John”, “Alexandrian”, emphasizing the descent of the Logos, the deity of Christ and the idea of deification of man; while Western Church – the “Christ of St. Paul”, “Antiochian”, emphasizing primarily His humanity and His paschal mystery, that is the way ascending from Christ “according to the flesh” to Christ “according to the Spirit”, continues fr. Cantalamessa¹¹.

In Orthodox art, the iconic image of Christ is the *Pantokrator* – Christ glorified. In the Orthodox Church there are no holy stigmatics, while the saints are “transfigured”. However, for Western art the characteristic image of Christ is Christ crucified. Through St. Bernard and the Franciscan movement the cult of Christ’s humanity and the mysteries of his life becomes more important. In this context the principle of following Christ, developed in the school of Antioch, is at home. These two traditions cannot be hardened, because each is in touch with the other; but having acknowledged their legitimacy and biblical character, now we need to exchange gifts. Let us note that from the “Latin Christ” may come a conception of the Church which is too historical, earthly, and human may come,

⁹ H. SOCHA, *Commentario giuridico alla legge della Società dell’Apostolato Cattolico*, Roma 2002, nr 189.

¹⁰ R. CANTALAMESSA, *Tajemnica Przemienienia*, 107.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 63–64.

whereas from the “Eastern Christ” – a concept that is too eschatological, too disembodied may appear. An authentic catholicity of the Church must include both the East and the West – concludes fr. Cantalamessa, following the Orthodox theologian P.B. Vasiliadas¹².

Summarizing, for our Christian formation originated in the climate of Western spirituality, it is important – in view of that exchange of gifts – to put a greater emphasis on the presence of Christ, who is alive, present, and active by his Spirit. The hunger for this living presence of the Lord, without which “the life of the Church turns into a museum piece”¹³, can be felt in the modern success of kerygmatic and charismatic movements that herald the presence of the Risen Christ and the power of His Spirit in the human “today”.

2.2. ...in the power of the baptismal grace...

Honoured scholar, Albert Cardinal Vanhoye, during Benedict XVI’s, Lenten retreat¹⁴, recalled that the baptismal priesthood of all believers is the main aspect of the priesthood in the Church (cf. 1 P 2,5: living stones, a spiritual house, a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices). Then, directing these words to the bishops and priests, he stated: “We find it easy to think exactly the opposite, namely that the most important thing is the ministerial priesthood, resulting from ordination, but it is not exactly so.” Many of the documents of the Magisterium of the Church confirm this: the ministerial priesthood serves the common priesthood. Those who have received the sacrament of Holy Orders are also called upon to exercise the baptismal priesthood. Card. Vanhoye even stated that for the priests themselves, for their personal good, their baptismal priesthood is more important than their ministerial priesthood¹⁵.

The sacrament of baptism is the reality that “cries out” for the salvation of man. It is also, with the sacrament of confirmation, the cornerstone of Christ’s prophetic office performed by the People of God. First of all, priests themselves should realize this, in order to be able to sensitize the laity to it. That is why it is always difficult both for the clergy and the secular to see that the Church is not only the *Mater et Magistra*, but also *Domus et Scola*. John Paul II, founding his recovery plan for the Christian identity in the new century on the ecclesiology of communion, put the traditional terms “Mother and Teacher” more as a communitarian dimension, as a “home and school of communion” (*Novo millennio ineunte*

¹² R. CANTALAMESSA, *Tajemnica Przemienienia*, 101–106.

¹³ FRANCISCUS, *Evangelii gaudium* [EG], Vatican 2013, nr 95.

¹⁴ A. VANHOYE, *Accogliamo Cristo nostro Sommo Sacerdote*, Vatican 2008.

¹⁵ Polish edition: *Jeżus Chrystus, nasz Arcykapłan*, Pelplin 2009, 156.

43). This reality still requires the “pastoral conversion”, to which Pope Francis calls (cf. EG 25–33). Therefore, he often asks, “Do you know the date of your baptism?”

2.3. ...with the joyful boldness of the Spirit...

The liturgies of the East and the West lead the faithful into the Lord’s Prayer with a very beautiful, typically Christian expression *parrhesia*, which means a joyful confidence, humble boldness, filial trust (CCC 2777–2778, for example, Heb 3,6; 4,16; 10,19). The Spirit of adoption, who cries in our hearts intimately to the Father, “Abba” (Gal 4,6) grants us this filial boldness.

Card. Vanhoye, commenting on the Epistle to the Hebrews (Heb 10,19 on the trust/confidence to enter the Holy Place by the blood of Jesus), draws attention to the fact that *parrhesia* does not just indicate a subjective feeling of confidence, but an objective law. In the democratic city-states of ancient Greece, the term *parrhesia* expressed the citizens’ right to speak up in the legislative assemblies. This right was not granted to foreigners and slaves. The New Testament uses this word to express the situation of Christian liberty, the rights of access and speech¹⁶. Here we are no longer “strangers and aliens” but “citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19), having “access to God in boldness” (Eph 3,12).

It seems that in the People of God, in people baptized, we need to awaken the feeling of this *parrhesia* that will be expressed in the bold proclamation of the Gospel, in the certainty of being loved by God, in the confidence that He helps us with his grace. Did our Holy Founder not have such boldness, when he went to wealthy individuals and to convicts?

Pope Francis calls out: “Challenges exist to be overcome! Let us be realists, but without losing our joy, our boldness and our hope-filled commitment. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary vigour!” (EG 109). “(...) The Holy Spirit also grants the courage to proclaim the newness of the Gospel with boldness (*parrhesia*) in every time and place, even when it meets with opposition” (EG 259). “How I long to find the right words to stir up enthusiasm for a new chapter of evangelization full of fervour, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction!” (EG 261).

Humble confidence leads to what Pope Francis called *primerear* – “taking over the initiative”: “The Church which «goes forth» is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 131.

fruit and rejoice. (...) Let us try a little harder to take the first step and to become involved (EG 24).

Christian *parrhesia* is manifested also in joy. Pope Francis writes: “There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter”. Meanwhile, “(...) an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!” (EG 6, 10). “The delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing”, the joy of the Gospel flowing from the encounter with Christ, “a joy ever new, a joy which is shared (EG 2, 9), so that they feel “the spiritual savour of being a people [of God] (EG 2, 9, 268).

2.4. ...in ways renewed in methods and zeal

Pope Francis reminds us that the new evangelization is realized primarily in three areas: 1. ordinary pastoral ministry; 2. the milieu of the baptized, who, however, do not live in accordance with the requirements of baptism; 3. the proclamation of the Gospel to those who do not know Jesus Christ or who have always rejected him (EG 14). Let us remember, however, that the term “new evangelization” has been developing. In 1983 St. John Paul II spoke in Haiti on the new evangelization, which is the evangelization, “new in ardour, new in its methods and new in its expression”¹⁷.

“Being a method”, however, has its consequences. I once heard a methodological note that during the course (lectures, classes, catechesis) one should not talk about the method, but use it consciously. You can talk about it before or after class, in order to assess it, but when in use, the method is in some sense “invisible”. In a world where lots of strength and resources are spent on advertising a “brand” or “label”, where is – in the proclamation of the Gospel – the obstacle to use any other flag than the one of Christ?¹⁸ The builders of the tower of Babel said, literally, “let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (Genesis 11,4). Here, the purport of the “name” was idolatrous. It is not people who can “make a name for themselves” – a sign of unity, but instead, the real saving and unifying Name – Jesus – is granted from heaven (cf. Lk 1,31; Acts 4,12).

Pope Francis says, “Realities are more important than ideas” (EG 231–233). According to some theologians, under the pontificate of Pope Francis, another change (after that conciliar – Christocentric one) of the Catholic paradigm of ecumenism has taken place. It involves the addition of a pneumatological and

¹⁷ GIOVANNI PAOLO II, *Insegnamenti* VI/1, Vatican 1983, 698.

¹⁸ See the “Meditation on the Two Standards” from the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

existential emphasis: an openness to the Holy Spirit's "surprises" and to the necessity for every Christian to have a living relationship with Jesus, resulting in imitating him and in sharing a lived faith. The Pope does not ask first about the denominational membership, but looks at human hearts and asks: "Do they know Jesus?" "Do they bear witness to Jesus?", "Do they go forth into the world with a mission?", "Do they manifest the life and dynamism of the Holy Spirit?" In the above terms, the stress is not so much on the *sacramentum*, but on the work of the Holy Spirit, which in sacramental theology was called *res sacramenti*, the spiritual reality for which the sacraments are celebrated¹⁹.

To sum up: the ecumenical dimension of this following/imitation Christ rises from his Trinitarian, Christological, pneumatological and baptismal foundation in the perspective of the evangelization.

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¹⁹ HOCKEN, *Azusa, Rome, and Zion*, Oregon (USA) 2016, 184n.

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