

## THE RELEVANCE OF THEOLOGY OF PEOPLE IDEAS FOR THE PASTORAL WORK OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S PREACHING

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### Abstract

The task of preaching is one of the principal tasks of the Church. This article aims to provide a theological basis for the implementation of the pastoral work of contextual preaching and to offer synodality between the clergy and lay catechists in realizing the pastoral work of contextual preaching. All of this is studied comprehensively from the perspective of theology of people. Based on literature review, this article explains theology of people as a form of theology that rewards popular culture and religiosity that lives in society as a wealth that must be preserved. This study shows that the aspect of appreciation for popular culture and religiosity in society plays an important role in the pastoral proclamation of the Catholic Church. This is because transformative preaching is contextual preaching as a form of preaching that departs from the cultural wealth of the community. The realization of contextual preaching requires the active involvement of the clergy and lay catechists. They must familiarize themselves with the cultural context of the people, reflect on it with the people, and build a joint movement towards life transformation.

**Keywords:** Catholic Church; Contextual Preaching; Theology of People; Sinodality

### I. INTRODUCTION

A few months after his election as Pope, Jorge Mario Bergoglio issued an apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* on 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2013. One of the interesting ideas in *Evangelii Gaudium* is the idea of an open-door Church. The open-door church is an urgent need in the midst of the complexity of the problems faced by humans. By open the door, the church actively involved in the joys, sorrows, anxieties, and hopes of the world today. The basic idea is that the Church must demonstrate a communion that is actively engaged in alleviating human suffering in the world, not only because suffering is a social issue but also because the Church's life is inherently characterized by its ability to respond to suffering by

showing preference for the weak, impoverished, and disenfranchised (Jebadu, 2017).

Pope Francis has given the Church a mandate to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed in everyday life, bridge distances, practice self-servitude, and embrace human life by responding to the humanity of Christ who suffers in others. This is consistent with the Church's social concern, which always opens the door to suffering (Paus Fransiskus, 2014:art. 24). In this regard, the work of preaching cannot be separated from the context of the people's lives. Effective preaching works prioritize the dialectic between text and context in a complete and harmonious manner (Prior, 2018:2).

The pastoral work of proclamation that dialogues with text and context is very necessary so that the Church's presence is truly contextual, relevant, and significant in our common life. Through the dialogue between the text and the context in the work of preaching, the Church not only proclaims Christ as the Son of God, but also proclaims Christ who is willing to become a man and experience firsthand the context of human life. Just as Christ entered and befriended the context of the life of the people, the Church is also called to heal the context by embracing the poor (Nae & Jewadut, 2025), embracing various local cultures, including embracing and living in peace with those of other religions and beliefs. These embraces make the Church truly synodal.

Steven Bevans, in his article, connects the idea of an open-door Church with the duty to preach the gospel with messages of joy, messages of mercy and tenderness, contextual messages, and messages of solidarity with the poor. This message calls for a Church made up of "missionary disciples," a Church that is "poor and for the poor," a Church that is de-clericalized, and a Church that is in dialogue (Bevans, 2014:304-305). One of the methods that can be applied in the pastoral preaching of the Catholic Church is the inculturation method. The study of Thomas Kadek Lintang Kurniawan and his colleagues shows the efforts of Dutch missionaries who preached the Gospel in Bali using the inculturation method. The inculturation efforts they made included making liturgical prayers and songs for the Eucharistic Celebration, creating a translation of the Gospel from the Balinese language, and building a Catholic Church with Balinese cultural nuances. They adopted the Balinese philosophy of life and dialogued it with the Catholic faith. Inculturation efforts are not intended to eliminate the Balinese philosophy of life, but to further entrench the Catholic faith in the lives of the people so that they can transform their life (Kurniawan et al., 2022). Through inculturation efforts in the proclamation of the Gospel, the Church becomes more synodal and adaptive to the context of the people's lives (Benedictus, 2022).

The Church's proclaim in the digital era has also become the discourse of a number of academics. Agrindo Zandro Raioan's study explains a new *locus* for

evangelization missions named as digital reality with the use of digital media that continues to grow rapidly. The purpose of evangelization in the digital era is to get closer to the Word and take part in the Church's communion through the use of digital media (Zandro, 2023). Proclamation that integrates the value of faith into the digital context requires an adequate balance between an emphasis on theological tradition and an emphasis on technological media. A way to respond to these challenges is to ground a holistic approach that combines deepening theological understanding, the improvement of cultural and technological skills, and collaboration between the Church and technologists (Sarma & Tarihoran, 2024). In this regard, according to Emmeria Tarihoran and Antonius Denny Firmato, the program "Empowering Catechist Students for New Evangelization" is very important. The program aims to improve their understanding of catechesis skills, particularly in the context of the use of digital media (Tarihoran & Firmanto, 2024).

Previous research has been limited to reviews of the pastoral work of evangelism with the opportunities and challenges faced by the Church, especially in the digital age. An aspect that was not paid attention to by previous researchers was the theological basis for the implementation of the pastoral work of contextual preaching. This article explains a theological basis for the implementation of the pastoral work of contextual preaching and to offer synodality between the clergy and lay catechists in realizing the pastoral work of contextual preaching. All of this is studied comprehensively from the perspective of theology of people. This article attempts to address two problem formulations. *First*, what are the important aspects of theology of people? *Second*, what is the relevance of theology of people for the pastoral work of the Catholic Church? Based on these problem formulations, this article aims to explain the important aspects of theology of people and the relevance of theology of people for the pastoral work of the Catholic Church.

## **II. RESULTS**

### **2.1 Theoretical Studies**

#### **2.1.1. History of the Birth of Theology of People**

In order to begin the Church's pastoral plan for the Argentine national setting, the Argentine bishops established the Episcopal Commission for Pastoral Work (COEPAL) in 1966 after returning from the Second Vatican Council. Bishops, theologians, pastoral representatives, and religious men and women comprise the group. Rafael Tello and Lucio Gera, both diocesan priests and professors at the Pontifical Faculty of Theology at Universidad Católica Argentina in Buenos Aires, are also members of the group. Gera and Tello were priests (theologians) who had a close connection with the ministry of the poor in the slums around Buenos Aires under the pastoral co-ordination of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the Archbishop of Buenos Aires at the time. For Argentina, Gera was an important theologian who

was involved in the Second Vatican Council and was an adviser to the General Council of the Latin American Bishops' Conference in Medellin (1968) and Puebla (1979) (Irawan, 2018).

In addition to Gera and Tello, two other diocesan priests who are members of COEPAL are Justino O'Farrell and Gerardo Farrell, an expert in the field of the Church's social teaching. Theology of people also has its roots in the Declaration of the Argentine bishops of San Miguel (1969), specifically in document VI on pastoral practices for the faithful, which was applied to the Medellín Conference for the Church in Argentina. Another figure is Fernando Boasso, a Jesuit priest from the Center for Research and Social Action, which became the birthplace of theology of people (Scannone, 2016).

Unlike liberation theology, which is based on Marxist theory and concentrates more on class battles, theology of people provides an approach that is more grounded in Argentine society's local culture and experiences (Diarsa & Ziaul Haq, 2024). Rafael Tello, for example, developed popular pastoralism that aimed to revitalize and strengthen aspects of local culture and popular religion of the community by mobilizing youth from parishes, government organizations, and other institutions related to the Church (Forni, 2020). Rafael Tello's thoughts on theology of people influenced the construction of Pope Francis' theological thought. From 1967-1970, Father Jorge Mario Bergoglio studied theology at Máximo de San Miguel and was a student of Juan Scannone, S.J., who was also a proponent theologian of theology of people. Since then, the perspective of theology of people influenced Bergoglio's theological thought and pastoral praxis. In fact, Pope Francis openly affirmed that Rafael Tello's thoughts on popular piety and popular religiosity influenced the writing of some of the central documents of the Latin American Catholic Church, including the bishops' conferences of Puebla (in 1980) and Aparecida (in 2007) (Forni, 2020).

### **2.1.2. Important Aspects of Theology of People**

According to Lucio Gera, "people" refers to a collective subject made up of a varied population that is bound together by a shared culture, way of life, and concern. Particularly in light of certain historical circumstances, the term "people" does not just apply to a single nation or race but also to an entity that shares common ideals and objectives (Remeseira, 2022). In addition to members of working socioeconomic classes or impoverished groups, the individuals in question are also those who genuinely want to join and stand together with the group. Therefore, in order to attain the common good, political decisions and solidarity are a part of the people's reality. Gera highlights the term's inclusivity to embrace all individuals who have a commitment to solidarity, even though in the Argentine context it

frequently refers to the working class with middle-to-lower economic power (Luciani, 2020).

An important aspect that distinguishes Argentine's theology of people from the liberation theology that developed in El Salvador and Brazil is the appreciation of popular culture and spirituality in society. In the perspective of theology of people, the people are understood as one entity with a high sense of religiosity because it has become an integral part of their culture. Rituals that have become an integral part of tradition are not seen as obstacles in the struggle for the ideals of liberation. This aspect is lacking and can even be said to be invisible in the general nuances of liberation theology. Liberation theology does favor the poor by using the analysis of class conflict according to Karl Marx (Jewadut et al., 2024), but ignores culture because it is seen as an opium that deprives society. The choice for the poor in theology of people is merged with the choice in the field of culture. That is, choosing to side with the poor means opening oneself to learning about their cultural richness (Regan, 2019).

According to Scannone, theology of people is closely related to appreciation of populist spirituality or people mysticism. The award is evident in Pope Francis' view of the importance of popular spirituality as one of the sources for the Church to theologize (Scannone, 2016). In addition, popular spirituality is also very important to be presented so that the Church does not get trapped in an institutionalistic and clericalistic quagmire (Irawan, 2018).

### **2.1.3. Theology of People and Pope Francis**

Respect for human culture is the main foundation for Pope Francis' view of popular spirituality. The appreciation of cultural existence is evident in the document *Evangelii Gaudium*. Pope Francis revealed that *Evangelii Gaudium* contained elements typical of theology of people without linking it to specific Argentine theologians (Løland, 2021). In Pope Francis' view, culture is a dynamic reality that is constantly being recreated by a nation. Culture is always open to meeting with the Gospel. In this context, popular spirituality is a spirituality that is inculturated in the culture of ordinary people. Through popular spirituality, the simple and poor play the affective dimension of the cultured experience with God (Irawan, 2018).

In addition to being the foundation of Pope Francis' philosophy, theology of people serves as a guide for the pastoral spirit of the Church, which must be anchored in the local cultural context of the community. Understanding popular culture and spirituality within the framework of theology of people encourages the Church to become an integral part of the local reality while simultaneously criticizing various irrelevant foreign ideological influences. By doing this, the

Church can play a transformative role in the pursuit of social justice and solidarity in society (Roszak & Tykarski, 2020).

The aspect of respect for human culture is also shown in special terms by Pope Francis in the Encyclical *Laudato Si'*. The Church's theological and social teachings are not the only source of the Church's involvement in dealing with ecological issues. The local wisdom of each culture can also be a reference for the involvement of the Church (Jewadut & Denar, 2024). According to Pope Francis, one way to affirm human existence as God's means of seeking the integrity of creation is to use a cultural approach. Pope Francis wrote: "We can all work together as God's means of protecting the integrity of creation, each according to his own culture, experience, initiative, and talent" (Paus Fransiskus, 2016:art. 14). Pope Francis argued that local culture can be one of the ethical references in discussions on environmental issues because culture is something that is alive, dynamic, and participatory. The local cultural richness of communities can enrich the discourse on human relations with the environment.

#### **2.1.4. The Church and Mission as Proclamation**

The presence of the Church as a fellowship of God's People is missionary. The Church will lose the meaning of its existence if it does not attach its role as the agent of God's mission in the midst of the world. The Church is present in the world and for the world, she continues to make pilgrimages in time, in every development of the world to carry out her mission, which is to proclaim the Gospel to all corners of the world. The consequence of this mission is that the Church must "move out." A missionary church is a Church that moves out to carry out God's mission. The important principle that applies is that it is not the Church that has a mission, but the mission that has the Church. That is, the Church is the means or agents to carry out the work of God's mission (*missio Dei*) (Conterius, 2021:27-41).

Mission is no longer understood as an attempt to Christianize people, but rather as a witness to the truth of God's revelation. Christians are sent to bear witness to Jesus' love for the poor and suffering. The mandate to carry out God's mission is not only addressed exclusively to missionaries who are dedicated to a particular religious order, but it is inclusive of all Christians. (Monteiro et al., 2024) Realizing that God is the owner of the mission, Christians are called to join in the mission and become active participants in transforming the world and creating new heavens and new earths (Ross, 2021).

The Church was not founded by Jesus for the sake of the Church itself, but rather to proclaim the Kingdom of God in the world. Christians are sent throughout the world (Mat. 28:19), to proclaim the "Kingdom of God" (Mat. 24:14), but they maintain the awareness that they are not part of this world. The Church's presence must be patterned to salt the world and be called to bear witness in various areas of



life, including the political sphere, in the spirit of the Gospel. This new understanding of the Church's calling was brought about by the Second Vatican Council.

Mission as a proclamation that reaches everyone with diverse life contexts is the duty and responsibility of all believers. All those who have received the sacrament of baptism without regard to their position in the Church or their level of education are evangelizers. Quality preaching requires the involvement of the faithful in general and lay catechists in particular because catechists have been prepared through education that deepens the Christian faith.

All members of the Church must demonstrate faithfulness to the great commission of the mission: Go, make, baptize, and teach them! (Cf. Mat. 28:19-20). Faithfulness in carrying out the preaching work refers to Jesus' own faithfulness in holding fast to the principle: "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God ... For this I was sent" (Luke 4:43) and imitated the life of Paul who was committed to continuing to preach the gospel: "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16). Thus, the recognition of the identity of the Church cannot be separated from the mission as a proclamation.

Mission as a proclamation is a very important work of mission in the Church. The church must rejoice in carrying out the work of preaching. This is because the Gospel proclaimed by the Church always invites the faithful to live in joy. Jesus' message is also always joyful: "These things I have told you, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (Jn. 15:11). The task of preaching will only be carried out with joy when the Church herself is always renewed by Christ and always evangelized before she herself evangelizes the world. In this context, the greatest challenge of the preaching work is the continuous renewal of the personal relationship with Christ (Panitia Sinode III Keuskupan Ruteng, 2017:35).

## **2.2 Research Methods**

This research based on literature review. Literature review research utilizes information from various reliable books, journals, and online publications related to the research theme to produce a systematic writing on the topic (Marzali, 2017). The literature review research goes through several important stages, including collecting articles, reducing the number of articles based on research variables, organizing the selected articles, discussing, and determining conclusions. Based on this opinion, this article is written by going through the following research stages: determining the focus of discussion, searching for relevant information, studying relevant theories, analyzing theories with real situations, and arriving at conclusions.

## **2.3 Research Results and Discussions**

### **2.3.1. Integration of Local Wisdom into the Pastoral Preaching of the Catholic Church**

The Church must always be open to exploring the richness of local wisdom values owned by the people. The Church's mission is to counter the tendency to the peripherization of local culture, which is claimed to be primitive in the current of globalization. If examined in the postcolonial thinking paradigm, the marginalization of local culture is part of the consequences posed by colonialism. In colonialism, there is diversity based on modern and traditional criteria in the social and economic life of a country (Pal & Dutta, 2013). That is why, colonialism nourishes the paradigm that local culture deserves to be abandoned because it is considered something primitive (Denar, 2024).

The local wisdom of the community contains a wealth of meanings that are useful for life. Local wisdom contains spiritual values that can accommodate the spiritual needs of the community. In addition, local wisdom can also play a stimulating function for social solidarity as well as artistic, historical, mystical, magical, and ecological functions. The application of local wisdom values can be one of the strategic steps to pursue an aesthetic experience of nature while realizing ethical responsibility for the environment.

In the framework of theology of people, the integration of local wisdom in the discourse and pastoral praxis of proclaiming is one of the efforts that can be taken by the Church. The local wisdom of the community is a fundamental and essential value in the implementation of pastoral work of preaching. There are two main considerations. *First*, the model of integration of local wisdom in the pastoral proclamation made by the Church can strengthen the sense of goodness in the People of God. In this case, the integration of local wisdom in the pastoral work of preaching will help God's People to understand the richness of culture and maintain their connection with the values and wisdom of life that have been passed down from generation to generation. By integrating elements and values of local wisdom in the pastoral work of preaching, the Church will become more rooted in culture.

*Second*, the integration of local wisdom in the pastoral work of preaching can help increase the participation of God's People in church life, both internally and externally. Because pastoral work of preaching that integrates local wisdom will definitely be more contextual and relevant to the conditions and needs of the community. Contextual and relevant because in essence local wisdom is tied to one specific locality, namely the community of people who live it. Local wisdom is tied to a particular *locus* so that it truly articulates the wisdom that is distinctive to a particular place and culture. In this context, the integration of local wisdom in the pastoral work of preaching, in addition to bring God's People closer to the context of their lives, can also strengthen the relationship between the Church and the



surrounding communities, especially indigenous communities that live the values of local wisdom.

### **2.3.2. The Urgency of Contextual Preaching Pastoral**

In essence, Jesus Christ with all His teachings and living testimony is the content of the Church's proclamation. The proclamation must first be Christological (Chen, 2018:48). Christological preaching is not only understood as an effort to transfer information and knowledge about Jesus, but especially as a means to lead people to a personal encounter with Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life. In order for the proclamation of Christ to truly penetrate into people's lives, contextualization is needed. In essence, contextualization is an attempt to bring together dialectically, creatively, and existentially the universal text and context or kerygma and the concrete reality of life.

The pastoral work of contextual evangelism requires the Church to make the context of the life of the faithful the starting point of the work of preaching. According to Steven Bevans, context includes four important things. *First*, context is closely related to the personal or social experiences that affect a person. *Second*, context is closely related to the cultural dimension. *Third*, context includes the social location of a person or a group of people. *Fourth*, the context includes the social realities in people's lives that are marked by change (Bevans, 2020a:5-10).

Contextual preaching is preaching that gives appreciation to the cultural reality of the community. In the process of proclaiming, inculturation is a necessity. Inculturation is understood as a dynamic and continuous process of encounter between the Gospel and culture marked by the revelation of the Gospel into socio-political and religious-cultural situations. The incarnation of the Gospel into the context of the lives of the people is transformative to the context and the lives of the local people.

Inculturation must be done as a double movement. Pope John Paul II explained the meaning of inculturation by saying: "Through inculturation, the Church incarnates the Gospel in different cultures and simultaneously brings nations together with their cultures into the communion of the Church itself." (Yohanes Paulus II, 2021:art. 52). One of the important points in the definition of inculturation is that the transformation of life occurs because of the inculturation in the lives of the faithful according to their cultural context, and that such culture must also enhance the Church's understanding of the one and the same Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world (Martasudjita, 2022).

Pope John Paul II stated that unity with the worldwide Church and fidelity to the Gospel are the two primary standards in the process of inculturation (Yohanes Paulus II, 2021:art. 54). The first criterion of conformity with the Gospel means that inculturation is closely related to the content of the Church's revelation and

faith sourced from Scripture and Sacred Tradition. While the second benchmark regarding communion with the universal Church relates to the practice of inculturation which must always be in bond with the universal Church. This means that all the diversity of symbolic expressions that are the result of the process of inculturation must never make the local Church and her liturgy separate from the universal Church with all her liturgical traditions (E.F.D. Martasudjita, 2010).

The involvement of the Church in local culture makes the Church even more enriched through the various cultural values in which the local Church grows. Thus, effective evangelization must take the good and authentic elements of a culture, permeate and perfect it with the spirit of the Gospel and integrate it into the living of life. In this way, the Church will know and reveal even better the mystery of Christ, while continuing to be moved for a continuous understanding. Only then can one truly live the gospel as something familiar. In this case, the Church is expected to be able to attract everyone to enter into a continuous process of change.

The transformation of the Church should be formulated as an effort to build a good life of the church through the Church's real involvement in the world. The Church in its proclamation should strive for a spirit of service that is directed to the value of transformation. The integrity of this transformation should be built through the correct appreciation of life according to the Word of God and expressed with respect for cultural identity (Martasudjita, 2012). With it, the mission of the Church answers the demand that mission is the responsibility of all members of the Church

In practice, the Church also needs to develop an inculturative proclamation that is in accordance with the cultural context in which the Church lives. In the context of Manggarai culture, for example, a comprehensive study of cultural ideas and values is needed that can be a preaching material that affirms and deepens the gospel message or expresses the gospel message more easily and touchingly. For example, inculturative preaching works with an ecological dimension can also be made by exploring the cultural wealth of the community in the field of ecology and dialogue it with ecotheological ideas. For example, the view of the Manggarai people about the land as the mother which in the Manggarai language is called *tana hitu ende dami* can be dialogued with the story of God who created everything as good as it is and wants the harmony of all creation (Jewadut, 2024). Similarly, the word *kita ata* as a name for humans in Ngada society reflects the coexistence of humans from their nature (Buku, 2014:152).

### **2.3.3. Sinodality Between Clergy and Lay Catechists for the Realization of Contextual Preaching Pastoral**

According to the idea of contextual pastoral work of preaching, it is very necessary for clergy and lay catechists to have synodality in carrying out pastoral praxis of preaching that is sensitive to the social and cultural context of the faithful

(Iswarahadi, 2013). Pastoral contextual preaching originates in human beings with the dynamics of their life struggles in the world. The church is required to come out of the altar room and into the world to discover the presence of God. With a pastoral pattern of contextual preaching, it is hoped that an involved Church will emerge, that is, a Church that is sensitive and concerned about the struggle of human life and moves to stand in solidarity with others who need help. In this case, contextual pastoral becomes a self-criticism of the Church that tends to close the door in order to enjoy the establishment, a model of the Church that Pope Francis has always criticized.

In compiling a contextual pastoral proclamation, there are five stages that must be passed. *First*, observing the living situation of the faithful. *Second*, make a social analysis, which is to find the key causes of the main problems experienced. *Third*, carry out theological-biblical reflection, that is, an effort to see the main problems that have been analyzed in the light of the Word of God or the teachings of the Church. *Fourth*, compiling proselytizing materials. *Fifth* carry out contextual pastoral activities of preaching.

The pastoral work of contextual proselytizing requires sensitivity to concrete problems that are part of the people's life struggles. The findings of the problem are then analyzed to find out the key causes, then reflected in the light of the Christian faith according to the teachings of Scripture or the teachings of the Church. This stage is called the hermeneutical stage which has been preceded by the socio-analytical stage (analysis of the context of the people's lives) (Monteiro et al., 2025). Then in the light of the inspiration of the teachings of faith, the Church tries to design contextual proclaiming materials for the problems found. This is where the opportunity for clerical synodality and lay catechists lies. Lay catechists who are already equipped with knowledge of the Christian faith can be actively involved in the preparation of contextual proclamation materials for the faithful. In this way, participatory pastoral work is truly realized (Jewadut & Nirmala, 2023).

In order to realize the pastoral task of contextual preaching, lay catechists need to be prepared through a certain educational model. The education of lay catechists in Flores needs to consider aspects of integrating the context of the people's lives and the local wisdom of the people into the curriculum and teaching and learning activities in the classroom. In addition, another way that can be taken is that lay catechists need to be more involved in the lives of the people, for example through Community Service (PkM) activities, live in with people in the parish during Christmas and Easter celebrations or faith deepening activities with the people in the Ecclesiastical Base Community (KBG). In this way, sensitivity to the context and richness of the meaning of local wisdom will continue to be honed and useful for the work of preaching to the faithful.

### III. CONCLUSION

In principle, theology of people gives appreciation to popular culture and religiosity that lives in society as a wealth that must be preserved. The aspect of appreciation for popular culture and religiosity in society plays an important role in the pastoral preaching of the Catholic Church. This is because transformative preaching is contextual preaching as a form of preaching that departs from the cultural wealth of the community.

The Church's involvement in pastoral work of preaching that dialogues the Gospel and the richness of local culture makes the Church even more enriched through the various cultural values in which the local Church grows. Effective evangelization must take the good and authentic elements of a culture, permeate and perfect it with the spirit of the Gospel and integrate it into the living of life. Thus, the Church will know and reveal the mystery of Christ better so that people can gain an adequate understanding of the faith that cultivates and motivates them to transform their lives.

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