

**Z***eitgeist* – THIS GERMAN TERM has found a home in many languages of the world. Coined for the first time in 1769 by the German poet and philosopher Johan Gottfried Herder and then used more widely after the French Revolution during the early 19th century, the “spirit of the age” or the “spirit of the time” has now become a sort of umbrella term. It describes the dominant cultural mentality of a particular epoch and the aspects of this mindset that are considered to be tasteful and acceptable. Yet, to capture precisely what *zeitgeist* means remains a difficult task, regardless of whether we appeal to social, political, economic, cultural, or aesthetic theories. In that sense, the concept of *zeitgeist* has gained a hypothetical value: its intention is to find out whether essential patterns of meaningful practices can be verified and thus should be upheld or whether they are to be rejected or at least modified. The characteristics of this set of cultural phenomena are threefold: it is specific for a particular historical time-period, it combines various realms of social life, and it extends across different geographical contexts. Among its important properties are its duration, scope, course, and the carriers, or, in current terminology, the media that nurture this period-related mindset.

Many of our contemporaries are aware that *zeitgeist* is a frequent and often used term and most of them will probably also see in it a favorable idea that deserves tacit or even explicit acquiescence. “I think this is the new *zeitgeist*: open, better than before, free, creative, inventive...” But there were always pejorative connotations linked to the term as well. At the beginning of the 19th century, the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe explained that when the “*Geist der Zeiten*” prevails in a certain era, a hegemonic culture takes over which dictates new normative roles and expectations; freed from previous social or religious ties, emancipated people will submit themselves anew to new constraints, and their originally desired freedom of thought will be gagged again. More than in the tradition of German idealism, however, the bitter aftertaste was felt especially by the Roman Catholic Church. The *zeitgeist* “demolishes and demoralizes the eternal truth of the Christian belief” – that was the firm conviction which the popes were inculcating for two centuries and have repeated until very recently. A good example of this is the *dubia* which four traditionalist cardinals voiced in 2016 after Pope Francis’s publication of *Amoris laetitia*. They were appalled that many Catholic Christians had begun to question the official church teaching which implied, as they argued, that “absolute moral norms”, “based on the Sacred Scripture and the Tradition of the Church”, prohibit “intrinsically evil acts” and are “binding without exceptions”; that any “creative interpretation of conscience” which would harm absolute moral norms is excluded; and that, when it comes to issues of marriage, divorced persons who continue to live in a new conjugal union find themselves in an “objective situation of grave habitual sin” and that they can in no way “be admitted to the Holy Communion”. According to these

cardinals, these dissident Catholics simply fell into the trap of rapidly changing fashions and trends; they wrongly distanced themselves from the truth revealed by God and thus demolished what the Christian tradition had called the “deposit of faith”. Consequently, the contemporary zeitgeist is equal to error, decline, and decay!

But it was the four cardinals who were wrong, as well as some vocal Roman Catholics who never cease claiming that the Christian faith does not adapt to new situations and that church teaching does not develop. Anyone slightly familiar with the history and theology of the Christian tradition will know that God’s revelation in Christ is always received in specific times and places. Since God does not override the human person with an eternal and unyielding truth, the Christian believer responds to God’s call in his or her own way, depending on his or her own personality and life story and relying on his or her own strengths and weaknesses. Christian faith does not find its foundation and its path in external doctrines but rather in the internal encounter with God in a particular time and place, thus in a particular context. The theological concept of *sensus fidei*, although for a long time avoided by official church teaching and mentioned explicitly for the first time in the dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* of Vatican II, describes very well what the “sense of the faith” means, namely that the individual believer does his or her best to understand and to comply with God’s call exactly there where s/he lives. In other words, the believer is a “contextualized person”.

In some way, another word for “context” is what modern idealist thinkers previously called the *Zeitgeist*. Thus, I would go so far as to say that context and zeitgeist both are an inherent part of the outlook of every Christian believer. If the believer cannot evade the context, s/he can also not escape the zeitgeist. Just look at the two millennia of theology and church history. Even when St. Paul was confronted with the imminent expectation of Christ’s return, he did not ask his contemporary believers to sell their possessions or stay unmarried as he was himself; with sober realism he recommended that they should maintain the life they were always leading. The first apologists of early Christianity appreciated the wisdom of ancient pagan philosophy, since they recognized that the Greek *logos* is a common denominator through which human reason and the Divine Logos, the Incarnated Word, come together. The philosophical movements of Neoplatonism and Manichaeism also had an enormous impact on St. Augustine and many church fathers just as medieval scholastics strongly shaped Christian civilization by reflecting on Aristotelian thinking. Since the Christian faith is not self-propagating, it needs this help from outside – and the zeitgeist is part of that faith story.

But another essential ingredient of this faith story is the process of testing and verification. “Test everything, hold fast what is good” (1 Thes 5,21) – that was already St. Paul’s advice which, inspired by Stoic philosophy, became a rule for everyday life. The church had always played its part in ensuring that the response to God’s call remains on course. The “sense of the faith” is never the ticket for unlimited individual freedom, but it generates a community of all the faithful. The *sensus fidei* evolves into the *sensus fidei fidelium*, the “sense of the faith of all faithful” or “the sense of the faith of the entire church”. And it is here that a

particular duty also emerges for the ecclesial magisterium: its task is *not to direct but rather to monitor church life*. The reason behind this is obvious: the context or, in other words, the contextuality of the faith is always ambivalent because it includes helpful and harmful, creative and destructive aspects, just as the zeitgeist confronts us with hypothetical assumptions which have to be verified, modified, or rejected. To make decisions on these matters is an extremely important but at the same time hazardous and unending task, especially for the magisterium: because to decide finally and definitively what the faith is, as if its doctrinal pronouncements or dogmas would remain the same and unchanging throughout the ages, would in the end mean to submit oneself to the zeitgeist! The church always scorned the zeitgeist in strong words, but it was often not aware that the zeitgeist was present anyway and thus affected the faith. An excellent example can be found in one of the articles in our journal *Marriage, Families & Spirituality* where the author demonstrates that the zeitgeist of the “sensational” and “spectacular” has already occupied mainstream academic and official theology when it comes to marriage.

To sum up, the zeitgeist dominates all our societies and churches; there is no escape from it. But instead of either naively acclaiming or assertively repudiating the zeitgeist, we should be thoughtful enough to scrutinize what is at stake and what could bind us together in our societies and, maybe even more, in our churches. To understand and to follow the “signs of the times”, a concept coined by Vatican II, remains a fundamental, though infinite task.

The first article in this issue of our journal examines how Pope Francis has established with his Apostolic Letter *Antiquum ministerium* in May 2021 a new “lay ministry”, that of the catechist, which since the promulgation of *Spiritus Domini* in January 2021 has also opened the ministries of lector and acolyte to women (see article in *MFS* 27/1, 2021, 8-35). According to *Patrik C. Höring* the new document does not fully eliminate remaining confusions concerning the function of sacramental ministries and the role of clericalized ministers. The issue of zeitgeist is also present in *Bertrand Dumas’s* article about the understanding of sacramental marriage in postmodern times. “Spectacularization” is his own phrasing to show that the new focus is now on “intensity”, “visibility”, and the “extreme” – a mindset that discounts the routine and everyday life of couples. The mystery of sacramental marriage is “turned into the spectacular, and the ordinary is lost in the attempt to make it conform to the remarkable”. Jesuit *Ward Biemans* sees in *Amoris laetitia* an opportunity to improve the pastoral accompaniment of couples before and after marriage. Empirical research proves, he argues, that premarital education has a sustainable beneficial effect on the relationship quality of couples. Part of his forthcoming research is to analyze how the settings of religiosity and spirituality could contribute to the new expectations. Rooted and educated in Indian culture, canonist *Thou Ngaomi* is convinced that love is a constituting and indispensable component of marriage at the very moment of the exchange of consent and must therefore obtain a provable juridical status. But familiar with the situation of “arranged marriage” in his native country, he argues that a loveless arranged marriage exclusively based on parental judgment and pressure is a “form of cultural aberration” – a provocative challenge that certainly invites further debates. *Benjamin Elie David’s* article turns to a different

cultural area. He intends to explain what the position of Judaism was with regard to intrafamilial marriages and what the reasons were for its evolution over the centuries. Although the prohibition of consanguineous marriage was for a long time commonplace in Jewish communities, historical and sociological changes have contributed to a gradual decrease of kindred marriages. The coronavirus pandemic could help us to interrupt the sense of progress which has become so dominant in modern times and which pushes us always forward with the assumption that we have to produce, to invent, to improve, to perfect etc. – that is *Samuele Francesco Tadini's* thesis. Referring to the 19th century philosophy and theology of Antonio Rosmini, Tadini proposes to deepen moral and spiritual life by adopting a new perspective on the “present” which includes a “look beyond time”, i.e. to eternity. *Jan Loffeld* concludes this issue of our journal with practical-theological reflections about the different grades of secularization which have now reached its highest phase and arrived also at the area of family pastoral care. While family rituals are still popular, they are coming up against the limits of what liturgy meant originally. The background is that transcendence as a place of “life in abundance” is more and more converted to “immanence”, i.e. the feeling that everything is achievable in the “here and now”. But what, then, is the sense of church rituals?

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