

MEMORIA: KEY TO POLITICAL THEOLOGY AND ECCLESIOLOGY

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Introduction

J.B. Metz's "political theology" opened up new avenues for a serious debate in theology with regard to the relevance of Christian faith in contemporary society. While criticizing the prevailing "bourgeois" (middleclass) subject and its "privatized" faith, Metz explores the possibility for an innovative and at the same time a socially committed Christian theology.

In the first phase of political theology Metz did provide a framework for a practical theology. However, he became acutely aware of the fact that his project needed further clarification and development. It was mainly thanks to the response he received during the lively discussion that followed after the publication of *Theology of the World* that Metz was able to come up with new ideas in his theological enterprise. In fact, he was well disposed to take criticism from others.¹ In other words, there was always a progress in Metz's thoughts. He was ready to correct himself again and again in the light of the new situations and he strenuously tried not to become his own follower.

Memoria is one of the recurring themes in Metz's theology since the late 1960s. Based on this concept he attempts to offer an alternative stance to look at society in general and the Church

¹"Shortly after the first phase in the development of a political theology, I became aware, through the work of some of my pupils, of the practical limitations of a purely theoretical critical theology." See J. B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, New York, 1980, 79.

in particular. In this article, first we shall analyze the notion of memory in its primeval form in Metz, especially in *Reform und Gegenreformation heute*,² *Diskussion zur politischen Theologie*³ and other writings. This will be followed by a study of his endeavour to apply the category of *memoria* to fundamental theology. The article will also enquire how Metz sees the function of *memoria* in the Church—*memoria* as the foundational aspect of the Church. Finally, the article will conclude by briefly analyzing the similarities and the ecclesial implications of Metz's proposals in the light of the Magisterium of Pope Francis.

Road to *Memoria* in Metz's Theological Trajectory

Metz's interest in the late 1960s and the early 1970s was to develop a fundamental ecclesiology from political theology's perspective. In *Theology of the World* Metz had described the Church as a "second order institution". In his opinion, the Church as a "second order institution" needed to be "the institution of a creative social critique" and "the institution of the critical freedom of the faith".⁴ He was aware of the fact that defining the Church as an institution of critical freedom would sound to any like the definition of a squared circle.⁵ In the late 1960s, his concern was to see how the Church as "eschatological congregation" could incorporate the critical spirit of freedom. Metz realized that the Church could do it only by appealing to the critical freedom of Jesus. Thus, while deliberating on the ecumenical potentials, Metz in *Reform und Gegenreformation heute* would highlight the foundational element of the Church—*memoria Christi*.

Controversial theology and ecumenical theology have shown that there are always limits to agreement. These boundaries are

²J. B. Metz, *Reform und Gegenreformation heute*, Mainz, 1969.

³J. B. Metz, "'Politische Theologie' in der Diskussion," in H. Peukert, ed., *Diskussion zur politischen Theologie*, Mainz, 1969, 284-296.

⁴J.B. Metz, *Theology of the World*, New York, 1969, 119-120.

⁵R. D. JOHNS, *Man In The World: The Political Theology Of Johannes Baptist Metz*, Missoula, 1976, 142.

not surmounted by a direct process- or by a direct theological comparison of the individual professions of faith and their historical backgrounds. Therefore, Metz comes to the conclusion that the rapprochement and unity of Christians could occur only “indirectly”. They come closer to one another inasmuch as they take the risk of emerging from their own ecclesiastical traditions, and attempt this self-transcendence in testimony to and in service of love.⁶ Metz calls upon the Church to emerge from behind closed doors and to preach the “not-yet” character of reality awaiting redemption. Metz asserts that “indirect” ecumenism could contribute to the success of Church unity. How? It starts not by confronting the individual formulations and traditions directly, but by confronting together the world and society by witnessing to the belief in Christ.⁷ The key to this “indirect ecumenism” is *memoria Jesu Christi*.⁸

For Metz, Christian and dog-matic formulations of belief are formulations of *memoria* or re-membrance. If the Christian belief is understood and interpreted as *memoria Jesu Christi*, there is possibility for unity among Christians. If the Church ignores its identity as the living *memoria Christi*, it will become just another “society” (*Gesellschaft*). At the same time, Metz insists that dogmatic or confessional faith should be seen as an affirmation of doctrines which can and must be understood as mnemonic formulas of a repressed, unconquered, subversive and dangerous memory of humanity. The memory of Jesus’ passion should not be seen in isolation. It should be narrated in the light of the history of human suffering. Therefore, for Metz, the criterion to judge the genuineness of Christianity is its ability to bring forward the critical, liberating and redeeming power of the Gospel into the present moment, so

⁶In a similar way, Pope Francis asks Christians to promote “unity in diversity”. Cf. J. Xavier, “Culture of Encounter and Reconciled Diversity: Pope Francis’ vision of Ecumenism,” *Asian Horizons*, vol. 11/2 (June 2017), 357-372.

⁷Metz, “Does Our Church Need a New Reform?”, 88.

⁸Metz, *Riforma e controriforma oggi*, Brescia, 1970, 52.

that men will be scandalized by it and yet be overcome by its power.⁹

Memoria Thesis

From the responses to *Theology of the World*, Metz realized that political theology overstressed eschatology at the expense of Christology.¹⁰ According to Ratzinger, in Metz's theology history is conjugated so radically in the future tense that the past is ignored. Historical thinking becomes *anti-historical* thought.¹¹ Is not the Christian faith based on a belief that refers back to the past? Is not the "eschatological reserve"¹² something of an exaggerated "empty" future?¹³ How can one distinguish Christian hope from the eschatological hope of an atheist like Ernst Bloch? According to Bloch, with whom Metz had lively discussions and debates, humans are by nature directed toward the future. Because of this, they are inclined to look forward rather than backward.¹⁴ Is Christian hope synonymous with such hope? Has the eschatological Christian hope not been anticipated in the event of Jesus, the Son of God? Or is it something unconnected to Christian hope? In Metz's own words, what is the "theological" (*theologischen*) character of political theology?¹⁵

Faced with such questions Metz develops the "*memoria thesis*". He argues that the Christian memory is not an effortless and simple remembrance of a past event. He also holds that the Christian faith based on *memoria Christi* is more than the intellectual appropriation of doctrinal formulas or the existential

⁹Metz, "Does Our Church Need a New Reform?", 90.

¹⁰Cf. R. R. Reno, "Christology in Political and Liberation Theology," *The Thomist* 56 (1992), 291-322.

¹¹Cf. J. Ratzinger, "Heil und Geschichte," *Wort und Wahrheit* XXV (1970), 3-14.

¹²Cf. J.B. Metz, "Political Theology," in Karl Rahner, ed., *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol. 5, London, 1970, 37.

¹³Metz, "'Politische Theologie' in der Diskussion," 284.

¹⁴Cf. T. F. Guenther, *Rahner and Metz*, Lanham, 1994, 54-55.

¹⁵Metz, "'Politische Theologie' in der Diskussion," 284.

decision where the doctrines cannot be objectively mediated. For him, the Christian memory does not simply place us before a salvation which is autonomous in itself and just allows us to apply it according to our needs in bits and pieces. On the contrary, this memory is proactive, *dangerous* and *subversive*.¹⁶ When this memory is narrated, no one can remain as passive spectator of events. This memory provokes and challenges our own present. “This kind of remembrance breaks through the magic circle of the dominant consciousness to redeem repressed conflicts and un-satisfied hopes; it maintains experiences of the past in opposition to the existing point of view and thereby ensures that the present understands itself.”¹⁷

The notion of *memoria* in Metz’s political theology has to do with mediation and defense of faith. In his opinion, Christian theology must give an account of faith to those who ask reason for its *hope* (1 Pt 3:15) not in abstract speculations, but in present-day, real life situations.¹⁸ The readiness to give an account of faith also shows our willingness to accept responsibility. This readiness enables us to take seriously the problems of the world in which we live. For Metz, the Christian hope does not propose a mere passive waiting, where the world appears as a waiting room, an antechamber, “where the Christian lounges around in lackadaisical boredom until God opens the door of his office and allows the Christian to enter”.¹⁹ In fact, for Metz, the Christian hope is closely linked to expectation that leads to concrete action in the world.²⁰

According to Metz, the readiness to defend the faith is not a sort of afterthought, a purely apologetical concession, when the Christian faith is fully established. In other words, the eagerness

¹⁶M. Xhaufflaire, “La mémoire subversive du Christ: introduction à la pensée de Johann-Baptist Metz,” *Études Théologique et Religieuses* 2 (1974), 259-260.

¹⁷Metz, “Does Our Church Need a New Reform,” 89.

¹⁸Metz, “Politische Theologie in der Diskussion,” 285.

¹⁹Metz, *Theology of the World*, 95.

²⁰Cf. J.B. Metz, *The Emergent Church: The Future of Christianity in a Postbourgeois World*, New York, 1987, 4.

to give an account of one's faith is part of the very essence of the Christian faith. This account is given not theoretically, but practically. When the believers give an account of their faith to the world around them, they themselves penetrate more deeply into the realities of faith and the problems of the world. They are only "hearers of the word" in a theological sense when they listen to the objections and difficulties of the social and historical situation of which they themselves form a part.²¹

This calls for complete mental integrity and unmasks the 'blind faith', which refuses to reflect and see clearly, as a lower and defective form. Christian theology must be the account (*logos*) of a faith which knows it must answer for its hope or for the universal divine promise which that hope accepts. Hence it cannot but strive to explain itself in terms relevant to its given historical situation.²²

This "responsibility" (*Verantwortung*) is an intrinsic part of the Christian faith. For Metz, a fideistic interpretation of faith is nothing but an "ideology of faith" (*ideologische Glaubengestalt*).²³ Ideology is incapable of defending the faith.²⁴ Here, Metz's political theology functions as ideology critique as well. In giving an account of faith, it becomes the critic and emancipator who strives to break through all thought-forms of faith, by constantly fixing its gaze on the foolishness of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.²⁵

In this regard, Metz also highlights the insufficiency of *fides qua creditur* (act of faith) in making the Christian faith relevant today. There have been various attempts in contemporary theology to make the Christian faith relevant to the world and history. Here, he has in mind the theology of Karl Rahner in particular. According

²¹Cf. Metz, "Unbelief as a Theological Problem," *Concilium* 6 (1965), 32-42.

²²J. B. Metz, "Apologetics," in Karl Rahner, ed., *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol. 1, London, 1970, 67.

²³Metz, "Politische Theologie in der Diskussion," 285.

²⁴Pope Francis too warns us against making Christian faith an ideology. Cf. J. Xavier, "Walking in the Presence of God," *Vidyajyoti*, vol. 81/6 (June 2017), 413-14.

²⁵Metz, "Apologetics," 67.

to Metz, all these attempts have one thing in com-mon—they all interpret the faith as an act of faith, *fides qua creditur*, as far as possible without any content, as a figure of person’s free, non objective decision. Interpreted in this way, faith looks to be contemporary. But an interpretation of this sort is always in danger of obscuring the power of Christian faith to *challenge* and *criticize* society. There is no remembrance or memory to recall, so as to break through the magical spell of the dominant consciousness of the present. Therefore, any attempt centred only on *fides qua creditur* simply lacks the critical and transforming portion of faith. “It seems to me to incur the danger of obscuring the socially critical force of Christian faith (which arises precisely from its contents and convictions), and of reducing it to a sym-bolic paraphrase of the modern consciousness without in any way helping to change it.”²⁶

According to Metz, in the biblical tradition faith is seen as *memoria*. The Christian faith is an attitude according to which the believer remembers promises that have been made and hopes that are experienced as a result of those promises and commits himself/herself to those memories. It is neither the intellectual model of consent to certain articles of faith nor the existential model of a decision that can make this interpretation of faith possible. What makes it possible is our “living” the memory of Jesus in practice (*Nachfolge Jesu*):

If the eschatological truth of the *memoria passionis* is not merely to be expressed in empty tautologies and paradoxes, then it must be reflected upon within, and determined by temporal circumstances, the memory of the suffering Jesus must be deciphered as a subversively liberating memory within the apparent plausibilities of our society, and the Christological dogmas must hold good as subversive formulas of that memory.²⁷

²⁶Metz, “Does Our Church Need a New Reform?”, 89.

²⁷J.B. Metz, “The Future in the Memory of Suffering,” *Concilium* 8 (1972), 18.

For Metz, while practising the faith, the believer renews and accomplishes the *memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi*. This faith is the remembrance of Jesus' testament of love in which the reign of God among us is revealed in a manner that destroys the oppressive powers. Jesus takes upon himself the condition of the oppressed and the marginalized in order to reveal the coming of the Kingdom of God as a liberating power of God's love without reserve.²⁸ In Metz's opinion, if faith is interpreted merely as *fides qua creditur* or act of faith, it leaves faith to the believer's free decisions, without a point of reference. This is the reason that Metz insists for *fides quae creditur* or content of faith.²⁹

As *memoria*, the Christian faith makes clear that it is a dogmatic faith that is tied to a certain content, *fides quae creditur*. But here again, Metz insists that dogma is not mere doctrinal formulas but the "interpretation" of *memoria Christi*. For Metz, an "atemporal" faith is imperfect and inadequate. Faith needs to be at the service of humanity and the world. Looked at from this point of view, Metz interprets the content of Christian faith (dogma) as *memoria*. Here, dogmas are interpreted as formulas or doctrines in which the claim of promises made and past hopes and fears that have been experienced are recollected in memory in order to break the grip of prevailing consciousness.³⁰ In the light of this interpretation, according to Metz, all traditions and the doctrinal formulas appear as formulas of *memoria Christi*:

²⁸Metz, "'Politische Theologie' in der Diskussion," 286.

²⁹Back in the 1960s, Metz had already called for a balanced integration of both *fides qua* and *fides quae* in theological discourse. There he maintained that *Dasein*-founding revelation (*fides quae*) presupposed a constantly perceiving *Dasein* (*fides qua*) as the constitutive medium of its own arrival in the *Dasein*. "*Auditus fidei* and *intellectus fidei* signify the one total structure of the event of revelation. A pure aposteriority of hearing without understanding is nonsense for the *Dasein*." J.B. Metz, "The Theological World and the Metaphysical World," *Philosophy Today* 10 (1966), 258.

³⁰Metz, "Politische Theologie in der Diskussion", 288.

I see Christian and dog-matic formulations of belief as formulations of *memoria*, or re-membrance. By this, I don't mean the everyday kind of relating through memory to the past—the kind by which we tend to transfigure everything that has already happened. And I'm not referring to Augustinian *memoria* but rather, to that form of remembrance that presses on and calls in question our present world by reminding us of the future that has yet to be endured.³¹

In this way, the Christian faith derives its power to criticize society not from an arbitrary decision of the individual, but from its content. In other words, the Christian praxis has its source in *memoria Christi*. If the faith is understood and interpreted as *memoria*, it is not difficult to see how it becomes *fides quae creditur* or dogmatic faith. Metz claims that this faith “can realize the form of socially critical freedom which is directed towards the world and which the Christian is called to in the light of the Gospel.”³² From that perspective, the traditional dogmatic formulations can be seen as the actualization of *memoria Christi* and of its “revolutionary” power in transforming the contemporary world. Thus memory becomes a creative and at the same time a subversive force for social transformation.

Dangerous Nature of *Memoria*

For Metz, the criterion to measure the authenticity of a dogma is the critical, liberating and redeeming danger (*Gefährlichkeit*) with which it brings the remembered Gospel into the present moment so that men will be scandalized by it and yet be overcome by its power.³³ All such dogmatic formulations are “dead” and “empty” when what they recall no longer displays any part of this *dangerousness* for society and for the Church.³⁴ They become

³¹Metz, “Does Our Church need a New Reform”, 89.

³²Ibid.

³³Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 184. See also D. Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung*, München, 1970, 328.

³⁴Metz, “Politische Theologie in der Diskussion,” 289.

meaningless if the dangerous quality (*Gefährlichkeit*) is extinguished by the mechanisms through which they are transmitted institutionally. Dogmatic formulas devoid of the dangerous memory of Christ serve only the self-perpetuation of the religion that has handed them on. If that is the case, the Church becomes an authoritarian institution that is no longer, as the body responsible for publicly handing down the Christian memory, subject to the dangerous claims of that memory.³⁵ On the other hand, genuine dogmatic formulas, in Metz's view, keep alive the memory of the crucified Lord as the dangerous memory of freedom in the social systems of our technological civilization. The Christian faith declares itself as the *memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi*. At the midpoint of this faith is the unambiguous *memoria passionis*, on which is grounded the promise of future freedom for all. We remember the future of our freedom in the memory of his suffering.³⁶

For Metz, the "future" too belongs to the category of "memory". The future does not come to us without remembrance. However, the future that *memoria* offers us is different from that of the bourgeois (middleclass) hope.³⁷ The middleclass hope conveniently keeps us away from the risks that are part of true faith. That is to say, the Christian memory does not offer us a paradise without danger, a refuge from our present disappointments—the memory of the "good old days". Nor does it belong to those memories which bathe everything from the past in a soft, conciliatory light.³⁸

Memoria in Christian Faith

Metz thinks that our understanding of *memoria Christi* as the memory of the coming of the kingdom of God (*Herrschaft Gottes*) in Jesus' love for the oppressed should be used as the

³⁵Metz, "Politische Theologie' in der Diskussion," 289.

³⁶Cf. Metz, "The Future in the Memory of Suffering," 18.

³⁷Cf. Metz, *The Emergent Church*, 4

³⁸Metz, "The Future in the Memory of Suffering," 14.

liberating force to change the direction of the classical Christological formulas (*christologischen Formeln*). At that juncture, Christian dogmas become the formulas of humanity's dangerous memory. If the Christian formulas are interpreted as formulas of mankind's dangerous memory, they can lead to a corresponding growth in our understanding of faith itself. They can instil in believers a sense of "responsibility" that resists every attempt to reduce faith to passivity. In that case, faith does not become the "opium of the people". It does not treat people as if they were yet to come of age. Moreover, it introduces Christianity itself as a redeeming memory against the monopolizing tendencies and "systems" of technical reason. Here, faith as memory questions the contradictions present in the history of human progress, which is often interpreted as linear and unidirectional as if it were natural. Faith as memory challenges any erroneous interpretation of human progress which believes that it can overcome the *past* (*vergangenen*) sufferings and obliterate the claims of the dead and the vanquished. In Metz's opinion, only the power of dogmatic memory can face the challenges of the totalitarian idea of progress.³⁹

The critical and liberating power of Christian dogmatic faith as *memoria* is not theoretical in nature. It is practical. Its critical power cannot be identified with the so-called critical power of the "negative dialectics" (Adorno). On the contrary, its critical power comes from *memoria Christi*. Since it arises from that definite memory, it is conscious of the deadly conflict between God's promises and the history that is dominated by human being's alienated desires and interests. Its criticism is not a total criticism. Faith as dogma born out of *memoria Christi* transforms the "law" of criticism into the "spirit" of criticism. This criticism takes the form of service and requires us to be men-for-others (*Daseins-für-Andere*). According to Metz, only when theology develops

³⁹Cf. Metz, "'Politische Theologie' in der Diskussion," 289-90.

a praxis in conformity with *memoria Jesu Christi* does it become a genuine theology.⁴⁰ Thus dogmatic faith and the praxis of imitation (*Nachfolge Jesu*) go together.

Memoria and Fundamental Theology

Fundamental theology has its origin in classical apologetics. It was in harmony with 1Pt 3:15, where the apostle invites Christians to be always ready to furnish reasons for their hope in order to defend their faith. In pursuit of this objective, traditional apologetics tried to defend the faith in three stages of proof: proof of religion (*demonstratio religiosa*), proof of Christianity (*demonstratio Christiana*), and proof of Catholicism (*demonstratio Catho-lica*). According to Metz, the classical structure of this discipline is hermeneutically flawed since it starts from a general concept of religion followed by a study on the historical development of Christian theology and finally arrives at the ecclesiological theme—the Church. On the contrary, according to Metz, a hermeneutically conscious fundamental theology should start from the theological concept of the present-day ecclesial reality. From there it could move to all other individual aspects of theology and their historical dimensions.⁴¹ For him, theology makes little sense if it starts from some abstract ideas. The challenges of the Enlightenment and the history of liberation make it imperative that theology should start from the world.⁴² Today, the faith of the individual is challenged by the milieu in which he or she lives. An attitude that is anchored only on deductive theological method makes faith a thing of the past.

For making the Christian faith contemporary, for Metz, *memoria* is one of the fundamental theological categories. In fact, he places *memoria* at the centre of his political theology. As

⁴⁰Metz, “‘Politische Theologie’ in der Diskussion,” 290-291.

⁴¹See Metz, “Kirchliche Autorität vor dem Anspruch der Freiheitsgeschichte,” 56.

⁴²Metz, “Kirchliche Autorität vor dem Anspruch der Freiheitsgeschichte,” 59. See also *Theology of the World*.

already mentioned, the very idea of political theology originated in the search for a “theology of the world”. It does not sidestep the challenges that come from the Enlightenment and its process of secularization and emancipation.⁴³ For Metz, theological reason needs to encounter the world in a creative way. A confrontation or a condemnation does not serve the purpose. What is needed is a new understanding of the world. At the same time, this new understanding is not something altogether “new”. In fact, it is a new understanding of the Christian *memoria* in relation to the world. He reminds us that the Incarnation in reality is God’s engagement with the world: “The Incarnation, the acceptance of the world by God in God’s son, is interpreted as a radical setting free of the world to itself, so that the principle of incarnation virtually turns into a principle of secularization.”⁴⁴ Metz’s *memoria* thesis is a reminder to this central theme of theology.

Political theology attempts to elucidate a Christian-theological version of practical reason in relation to the world. It emphasizes that the subject of the universal history is none other than God himself. In other words, in *memoria passionis*, God appears in his eschatological freedom as the subject and meaning of history. Political theology does not introduce God as a “stopgap” or an “after thought”. In Metz’s view, there is no politically or socially identifiable subject of universal history. The meaning and the goal of this history are placed under the “eschatological proviso of God”. In this way, the Christian eschatological memory challenges the modern pessimistic evolutionary philosophies. For Metz, the Christian *memoria* introduces the God of Jesus’ passion as the subject of the universal history of suffering.⁴⁵ Wherever a party, group, race, nation, or a Church defines itself as the universal subject, according to Metz, the Christian *memoria* has the

⁴³Metz, “Teologia politica: questioni’ scelte e prospettive,” in R. Gibellini, ed., *Ancora teologia politica. Ildibattito continua*, Brescia, 1975, 51-52.

⁴⁴Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 41.

⁴⁵Cf. Metz, “Redemption and Emancipation,” 325.

obligation to expose it as political idolatry with totalitarian intent. Making use of an apocalyptic term, Metz calls such attempts as “bestial” tendencies. In this way, in the light of the Christian *memoria passionis*, political theology liberates social and political life from totalitarianism. But, as opposed to the liberal version of idealism, this liberation is utopian⁴⁶ in orientation. Here the critical reason is made practical with the help of a distinct memory of liberation—*memoria Christi*. In this struggle what gives hope to the hopeless is the *memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi*.

Furthermore, according to Metz, the *memoria Christi* reminds us of the freedom of the eschatological reign of God and its arrival as “love without limits”. Though this memory cannot be interpreted as the fruit of our social and historical struggle, it acts within these categories for creating a “disinterested” humanity as the point of reference for enlightenment and emancipation. Hence the Christian memory of suffering can become the ferment for a new world order.⁴⁷ This memory takes the form of that tiny “hunchback”, who keeps on encouraging the tired fighter against the mighty giant and becomes the source of confidence in him to fight back and not to concede defeat and go home without a fight.⁴⁸

Metz holds that contemporary fundamental theology should have a practical character. In an age where metaphysical thinking was predominant, theoretical foundations of Christian faith or theoretical points of departure for fundamental theology was viable. Today, that is not the case. In the contemporary world, any theoretical foundation can be regarded as meta-theory⁴⁹ that does

⁴⁶Here, Metz uses the word “utopian” in a creative and positive sense. “Utopia” might mean either “no place” (*u + topos*) or “good place” (*eu + topos*). In Metz it is not an idealistic illusion but a realistic expectation for a full life in the eschatological proviso of God. Cf. J.K. Downey, *Love’s Strategy: The Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz*, Harrisburg, 1999, 7.

⁴⁷Metz, “Teologia politica: questioni scelte e prospettive,” 61-62.

⁴⁸Cf. Metz, “The Future in the Memory of Suffering,” 13.

⁴⁹Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 5.

not necessarily concern the life of the people in a given society. Metz holds that fundamental theology cannot simply develop a system of justification without reference to the “subject” of faith (believer) and his/her historical context. That is why Metz insists that fundamental theology is closely linked to *praxis* of faith. For him, fundamental theology can and should never be a theology that is purely confined to books or lectures—because of its claim to justification. It needs to absorb new *praxis* and new experiences, depending on the historical context of the “subject” or the believer. However, the *praxis* he has in mind is not “any” *praxis*. It is the *praxis* of Jesus. Moreover, in this *praxis*, Metz invites the believers to make use of the critical power of *memoria Christi* to defend the Christian faith. When faith is seen as *memoria* the consequence is that theology, especially fundamental theology, becomes the *public forum* of that memory. It also helps the believing community, the Church, to become conscious of its new identity—the community of the followers of Christ.⁵⁰ It will not hesitate to exercise the *critical freedom* of the memory of Jesus.

***Memoria* and Fundamental Ecclesiology**

While posing the question: “has Christianity failed historically?”, Metz draws our attention to the criticism of some of the modern social theories on religions, especially on the Church. In these theories, the Church is described as an organization with a consciousness that is not up-to-date. Based on antiquated and obsolete concepts it judges the present and imposes institutional taboo on knowledge and creative thinking. Those theories present the Church as a remnant that is opposed to emancipation and progress of humanity. It is been called “opium” in suffering and unjust relationships. According to these modern social theories, the Church has lost or is rapidly losing its function in contemporary society. Once considered an “irrelevant” remnant of the past,

⁵⁰Cf. J.B. Metz, *Followers of Christ: The Religious Life and the Church*, New York, 1978.

militant criticism against the Church gives way to *indifference* or benevolent courtesy, a *caricature of the sympathy that is shown to a dying man*. In Metz's opinion, even belligerent adversaries of the Church are more and more restrained in their struggle against a "privatized" Church. For them, the Church has hardly any part to play and has become a "quantité négligeable".⁵¹

It is not appropriate, according to Metz, to give a quick theological answer to these criticisms and take refuge in the "minority status" of the remnant. It is better to know who/what caused this state of affairs. The failure of the Church needs to be taken into consideration before drawing any conclusion. It has been people's historical experience with the Church that it represents a religion that is *not believed*. His/her collective memory of disappointments caused by the Church, especially its dubious alliances with the power structures, confirm this view.⁵² According to Metz, the problem cannot be solved by providing a better or more subtle interpretation of the Church's past history. The Church needs to undertake a painful process of change. The way forward is that Christians *live* the tradition of the *mem-oria Christi* in an authentic way. At the same time, for Metz, any "private" tradition of *memoria Christi*, completely free of institutional framework and anchored exclusively on the whims of the individual believer, is an illusion.⁵³

For Metz, the Church is the public forum of the *memoria Christi*. The Church must understand and justify itself as the public witness and bearer of the tradition of a *dangerous* and *subversive* memory of liberation in the face of all-absorbing "systems" of our emancipative society. According to Metz, this is the theological basis of the Church. This thesis is based on the conviction that *memoria Christi* is the core of Christian faith. In faith, Christians accomplish the *memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu*

⁵¹Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 91.

⁵²Metz, "Editorial," *Concilium* 7 (1971), 11.

⁵³Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 92.

Christi. This *memoria* does not dispense the Christian from the risks involved in the process of professing one's faith. This *memoria* is a dangerous and liberating memory that resists and questions the present because it reminds us not of a nebulous future that hinges on some middle class bourgeois hope, but precisely of a future that is already accomplished in the *memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi*.⁵⁴

If the Church needs to be the public forum of the memory of Jesus, according to Metz, it needs to retrieve its original identity. It needs to remind itself constantly that the Church is not a natural people, but a people "called out", a new people that has become the *subject* of a new and unsuspected history of God with humanity. It finds its identity only in the narration of this history of salvation and its attempt to live by it. It is not possible to be the Church or the "people of God" without bearing this new history. In Metz's view, being the Church is a movement which means being "called out" to an uncharted territory. It includes an exodus, a "lifting up of the head", a "change of heart", an "imitation" and an acceptance of life and the history of suffering in the light of a great promise.⁵⁵ It is also clear from the early history of the Church how great a price it had to pay for liberating itself from the populism of the societies of the period and thus becoming a new people. Metz reminds us that the members of this new people were accused publicly of atheism.⁵⁶

Today, on the contrary, the Church is paying a price that has little to do with its original identity. According to Metz, the Church is paying the price for protecting its people too much. It is paying the price for not letting the people be the "subject" of the Church. It is paying the price for letting the Church become the "Church

⁵⁴Cf. Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 89.

⁵⁵This notion of the Church appears in Pope Francis' programmatic document, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

⁵⁶J.B. Metz, "Kirche und Volk: oder der Preis der Orthodoxie," *Stimmen der Zeit* 185 (1974), 799-800.

for the people” rather than the “Church of the people”. Metz asks some pointed questions: Today, who is the “subject” of the faith of the Church? Is he the professional theologian/Church “official”, or the individual Christian articulating his/her own history in the presence of God? Metz recalls that the Bible is not the product of professional theologians. When the Church becomes the Church of the people (a people of God), the communion of the new people will be able to write its collective religious biography, as did Israel and later the early Christian communities in important passages in the New Testament. Theology will then be the memory of the lived faith of the people who have become conscious of their own history and their collective identity, the Church, in God’s presence.⁵⁷ Today, theology is mainly experienced in libraries and conferences, where the opinions and counter opinions of one’s colleagues play a much more prominent role than the religious life and history of the people. The mysticism of the ordinary people finds hardly any place in theology. The reason is that theologians are afraid of lowering the scientific standard of their subject. Thus they are untouched by the usually silent doubts of the ordinary faithful. In Metz’s opinion, if faith is a *fides ex auditu* (faith comes from what is heard, Rm 10:17) it is always a question of listening to what the little and the poor people are saying, those “to whom it is given” (Mt 19: 14). If theology needs to be practical and relevant to modern man, it needs to be the faith expression of the people. In theology, the symbols and stories of the people are irreplaceable. Nothing will take their place, if the people’s memories are abruptly extinguished.⁵⁸

Metz also notices the gulf between the existing faith of the people and the official faith of the Church, the religion of the people and the orthodoxy of the Church. The people often dismiss the

⁵⁷Ibid.,” 807.

⁵⁸Ibid.,” 798.

orthodoxy of the Church (which has little to do with faith as *memoria!*) as the expression of the religion of the Church's priests. They have little to do with such faith since their history or memory has no place in it.⁵⁹ The Church is so slow to understand that it is impossible to be "orthodox" in certain inhuman circumstances where one is aware of the demands of *memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi*. It is inhuman of Christianity to come to terms with the inhumanity of those circumstances. We are not expected to make an apotheosis of suffering. For Metz, only cynics can interpret it as the privilege of the nobility. Such suffering is certainly not a memory of God, nor does it contain any memory at all and, therefore, any hope. In such cases, consolation is insufficient: "Go on sleeping my child, it is not worth keeping awake" (*Schlafe, mein Kind, es lohnt sich nichtaufzuwachen*).⁶⁰ It may be a consolation, certainly not a solution. A cure has to be effected by transforming the conditions of life.⁶¹

In Metz's opinion, the real problem that the Church faces today is not the tension or the opposition between the *authority* of the institution and the *freedom* of the individual as in the time of the Enlightenment. Today, it is the question of the lack of institutionalized critical freedom.⁶² The crisis the Church faces today, according to Metz, is its inability to witness freedom in an authentic way.⁶³ This freedom is nothing but the biblical freedom—the liberated freedom of Jesus Christ. It stands above all ecclesial authority. It is *norma normans*, not *norma normata*. It means, according to Metz, that Christian freedom cannot remain indifferent to the demands of the history of liberation. The biblical message of liberation speaks not only of the liberation of human being from

⁵⁹Ibid.," 800.

⁶⁰Ibid.," 803. "Dormi, bimbo mio, non vale la pena stare svegli!" Metz borrows this expression from the Italian poet, critic, novelist Cesare Pavese (1908-1950).

⁶¹Metz, "Kirche und Volk: oder der Preis der Orthodoxie", 802.

⁶²Metz, *Theology of the World*, 116-117.

⁶³Metz, "Kirchliche Autorität vor dem Anspruch der Freiheitsgeschichte," 66.

sin and death but also from all forms of idolatry, both cosmic and historical, and all forms of absolutism and self-enthronement of human beings. The Church needs to act as the public memory of the freedom of Jesus in the systems of our emancipative society. It reminds us of an indebted liberation, God's eschatological history of liberation which is gained in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. This liberation cannot be absorbed into the ideal of human being's coming of age that is contained in the middle class history of the Enlightenment or the history of liberation by revolution. It is from the freedom of Jesus Christ and the memory of the "eschatological reserve" that the Church can and must draw its strength to criticize all totalitarian systems and ideologies that perpetuate a linear and one-dimensional emancipation. The *memoria Jesu Christi* is not a memory that deceptively dispenses the Church from dangers and risks. In fact, this memory is the *subverter* of the *status quo*. According to Metz, the Church can be an authentic witness to that *memoria* only when it becomes the bearer of the liberating and subversive memory of the freedom of Jesus Christ. That Christian freedom at times takes the form of *via crucis*. The question is whether the Church is ready for that freedom.⁶⁴

Political Theology and the Magisterium of Pope Francis

The papacy of Pope Francis proposes a new way of being Christian. Many of the themes that we find in political theology resonate with the thoughts of Pope Francis and his Magisterium.⁶⁵ For example, like Metz, for Pope Francis, faith is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality. Faith is alive only where it is shared and nurtured by the community of believers. And that means faith cannot be separated from the "faithful people" of God. Again, like Metz, Pope Francis invites Christians to be proactive and responsible in this world. In the same way, the Pope speaks of

⁶⁴Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 89.

⁶⁵Cf. J. Xavier, "The Church of the People: Ecclesial Vision of Pope Francis," *Vidyajyoti*, vol. 80/8 (August 2016), 585-608.

the identity of the Church that comes from her vocation and mission.⁶⁶ Further, he invites theologians not to be followers of their own thoughts. Instead, they are invited to remain with an open mind to read the signs of the times: “The theologian who is satisfied with his complete and conclusive thought is mediocre. The good theologian and philosopher has an open, that is, an incomplete thought, always open to the *maius* of God and of the truth, always in development”.⁶⁷

Metz calls for a socially engaged spirituality—“the mysticism of open eyes”—to perceive the suffering of others, both living and dead.⁶⁸ When Pope Francis suggests that the Church should open its doors to strangers, he is touching on topics that J. B. Metz develops in political theology. For Metz, like Pope Francis, any attempt to protect the Church from the “contamination of the world” or from “strangers” is not a true Christian attitude. The Church, as the Church of the Son, cannot remain closed to the “strangers” in the historical world.⁶⁹ The fact is that the “conditioning by strangers” is not something that was subsequently added to the Church. On the contrary, it is an element of the Church’s constitution and part of its *specificum christianum*. In the same way, the Church cannot come to know what is “Christian”

⁶⁶Cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 20-24.

⁶⁷Pope Francis, “Theologians on their knees with open minds,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 18 April 2014, 13.

⁶⁸J. B. Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical Political Dimension of Christianity*, Mahwah, N.J., 1997, 163.

⁶⁹Metz draws our attention to the origin and transformation of the primitive Church: “Its foundation was the crumbling of the wall of division between Jews and heathen, the tearing of the veil of the Temple, and the transformation of the Synagogue into the Church in the midst of mankind, and for mankind. The movement into alien territory was obligatory. Therefore the Church surpasses itself by moving into that alien world to which it must always relate because it is the Church of the Son who reclaimed this ‘alien’ country as his ‘own’, and sealed this claim with his death for all men— even for unbelievers.” J.B. Metz, “Does Our Church Need a New Reform,” *Concilium* 6 (1970), 87.

or “human” prior to, and without going through, the experiment of historical experience. Whenever the Church forgets its identity “being defined by the other” (EG 179), it runs the risk of becoming a “sect” in the theological sense of the term.⁷⁰ In the face of losing its relevance and identity, the Church, out of fear, tries to withdraw itself into its shell. Furthermore, aggressive “self-assertion” of a closed-in Church can take different forms like ultra-conservatism, pure traditionalism, zealous language, inability or unwillingness to have new experiences. These things make the transformation of active Church life into a humourless dogmatism. At best, what such an attitude could do is to drive the Church into a backward-looking stabilization.⁷¹ Like Metz, Pope Francis cautions the Church against the temptation to be a “sect” that insists on withdrawing from the world (*fuga mundi*). Pope Francis urges the Church to be a welcoming house of the Father with doors always wide open (EG 47). While reflecting on the parable of the Lost Sheep, Pope Francis reminds us that if we are not outgoing and welcoming people, we “run the risk of shutting ourselves in the pen, where there won’t be the odour of the sheep but the stench of enclosure!”⁷²

Pope Francis also approaches Christian life from the perspective of *memoria*. Referring to Abraham’s faith anchored on memory, he says: “This remembrance is not fixed on past events but, as the memory of a promise, it becomes capable of opening up the future, shedding light on the path to be taken. We see how faith, as remembrance of the future, *memoria futuri*, is thus closely bound up with hope” (*Lumen Fidei* 9). In fact, there are very many similarities in the thoughts of Pope Francis and Metz.

⁷⁰J.B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2013, 95-96.

⁷¹Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, 77.

⁷²Pope Francis, “No One Is Ever Lost,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 6 May 2016, 3.

Concluding Remarks

As already seen, *memoria Christi* is one of the central themes of Metz's fundamental theology. In its theological status, *memoria* has an important role to play in making political theology a practical fundamental theology. According to Metz, as a theological category, *memoria* should not be seen as a concept of resignation or tradition in contrast to that of hope. Instead, as dangerous memory, it should be regarded as the expression of eschatological hope, elaborated in its social and historical mediation. Memory has a fundamental theological importance when it is taken along with solidarity with victims, including the dead and the conquered.

Metz believes that only *memoria* has the power to defend the freedom of the individual in a world dominated by technical reason. In an "administered society" the human being is treated not as "subject" but as "entity", who could easily be dispensed with when his "usefulness" is exhausted. In fact, memory—especially the dangerous memory of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection—decodes the meaning of suffering in human history. It uncovers the lies of the past and the ideologies of the present. As a fundamental theologian Metz speaks of faith, both of the individual and of the Church, in relation to the dangerous memory of Jesus. From that perspective, *memoria Jesu* is central to our dynamic understanding of dogmatic faith. With its help, dogmas can be seen as the formulas of the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ and his *praxis*.

Memory can have a very decisive ecclesiological significance in defining the Church as the public vehicle transmitting a dangerous memory in the systems of social life. In the first phase of his political theology, especially in *Theology of the World*, Metz urged the Church to be an *institutionalized critical freedom* to stand up against the onslaught of technical reason. In his *memoria* thesis, in the late 1960s again he returns to the theme from a different angle. While highlighting the category of memory in political theology Metz wants to show that our life will be compatible with

the life of Jesus only if we follow his footsteps, especially in his passion, death and resurrection.

It is the *memoria Christi* that makes the Church really the Church of Jesus Christ. It is not any unreflected tradition or “traditionalism”, but tradition in the form of *memoria* that becomes the source and foundation of a true ecclesiology. That *memoria* helps the Church to be the Church of the Son, guided by the Spirit. That Church will not be afraid of exercising the spirituality of liberated freedom to defend the individual in the face of human suffering. Even when it faces the threat of being reduced to a minority, it will not resign itself to be a “sect” in the theological sense.⁷³ The memory of Jesus helps the Church to be the “Church of the people”, not the “Church for the people”. According to Metz, that will be a new mode of being the Church in today’s world.

⁷³Cf. Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 95-96.