

Popular religiosity and introducing children to religion

A resource in the Italian context

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Popular religiosity is still a relevant part of the Italian religious landscape. In spite of modernisation and secularisation, technological developments and moral autonomy within contemporary society, popular religious practices are benefitting from a renewed interest. A large number of people are visiting shrines and sites of pilgrimage – and in some cases the numbers are increasing.¹ This phenomenon raises questions about what role popular religiosity can play in Christian instruction and religious education for children in Italy. Particularly in view of the positive comments about popular religiosity in the teachings of Pope Francis, and his encouragement to view popular religious practices as an „evangelising power“.² Admittedly some popular religious traditions could have negative implications in terms of developing a

mature understanding of Christian beliefs and attitudes. Nevertheless, this article focuses on the potential contribution of popular religiosity to the broader process of introducing children to religious ideas and practices, especially within families, but also within religious communities and schools. Firstly, we outline the theology underpinning this positive view of popular religiosity (1). We then examine how popular religiosity can be a resource for teaching children about the Christian faith. The analysis is based on three elements: popular religiosity is accessible to families (2), the practices complement liturgical practices (3) and remain an integral part of Italian life and culture (4).

1. Popular religiosity as a resource

Academic discourse on popular religiosity, especially in theology, is often influenced by an ‚elitist‘ prejudice that tends to devalue and interpret popular religiosity as a second-class form, suitable for simpler, less educated people, and closer to superstition than to mature religious faith. In order to avoid this and to focus rather on popular religiosity as a resource, this section presents some insights from the theological field that influenced the teachings of Pope Francis on this topic, namely the theology of the people.

1 Prandi, Carlo: Storia e in-attualità del concetto di religione popolare. In: Berzano, Luigi/Castegnaro, Alessandro/Pace, Enzo (Eds.): Religiosità popolare nella società post-secolare. Nuovi approcci teorici e nuovi campi di ricerca, Padova 2014, 15–38.

2 Pope Francis: Evangelii Gaudium. Apostolic exhortation on the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world, 24 November 2013 (hereinafter EG), 122–126. All English translations of documents of the Second Vatican Council, Popes and Vatican Congregations have been taken from the Vatican website: www.vatican.va.

Rafael Tello, one of the fathers of the Argentinian theology of the people, requires theologians to listen to and learn from popular religiosity. He bases this requirement on the three dimensions of the act of faith defined by Thomas Aquinas: *credere Deum*, *credere Deo*, and *credere in Deum*.³ According to Aquinas, the act of faith is expressed in three dimensions: God is the object of the faith (*credere Deum*), i.e. God is the mystery who is believed; God underpins the act of faith (*credere Deo*), i.e. He is the reason why one believes; and God is the end or goal of the act of faith (*credere in Deum*). He is the supreme Good that attracts the believer. These are three ways that believers can relate to God; all three of them express a true act of faith. Tello posits that popular religiosity emphasises two of the three dimensions: the believer's trust in God (*credere Deo*) and the gravitation of the individual towards God, in accepting the attraction to God (*credere in Deum*). The third dimension (*credere Deum*), which is the rational explanation of the truths of faith, tends to be neglected in popular religiosity.⁴ Nevertheless, clinging to and giving oneself to God – *credere Deo* and *credere in Deum* – are the pivotal elements in the act and experience of faith. This theological perspective can improve our understanding of popular religious practices and beliefs as a real resource for evangelisation, inasmuch as they are opportunities for people to express and share their faith. Indeed, pilgrimages, processions, the veneration of sacred images and relics, and popular religious festivals are occasions for Christian mission and witness, events that promote greater trust in God and movement toward Him.

As such, any theological understanding of the act of faith that fails to engage with this „*sensus populi*” would be incomplete, because it would

not take into account this true act of faith rooted in a specific culture and popular religiosity. The Argentinian theologian Fernández argues that the term „*sensus populi*” means more than „*sensus fidelium*”, in that the former preserves the community nature of the act of faith – the people. Here the community becomes an agent of the evangelisation process, because the „people continuously evangelises itself.”⁵ This sentence is quoted verbatim by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, and comes from the theological and ecclesiastical environment in Latin America, as expressed at the conferences of the Latin American bishops over recent decades and in the aforementioned theology of the people. From this perspective, one understands why Pope Francis dedicated five paragraphs of his policy document to the „evangelizing power of popular piety.”⁶ It should be noted that this marks a shift in the teaching of the Church towards a more positive opinion of popular religiosity, developing the approach introduced in the *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Pope Paul VI, which oscillates between valuing and purifying popular religious practices and beliefs.⁷

This move towards a more positive take was recognised by Pope Francis back when he was the cardinal of Buenos Aires: he wrote that Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* had already taken a step forward by emphasising the richness available to the Church in this popular phenomenon and by calling it „popular piety” instead of „popular reli-

3 Bianchi, Enrique C.: Introduzione alla teologia del popolo. Profilo spirituale e teologico di Rafael Tello, Bologna 2015, 169–230.

4 Ibid., 172.

5 Fernández, Víctor M.: El „sensus populi”: La legitimidad de una teología desde el pueblo. In: *Teología 72* (1998) 133f., 162; *III Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano: Documento conclusivo de Puebla*, 23 March 1979, 450; *V Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe: Documento conclusivo de Aparecida*, 13–31 May 2017, 264.

6 EG 122–126.

7 *Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments: Directory on popular piety and the liturgy. Principles and guidelines*, December 2001, 60–66.

giosity". Cardinal Bergoglio also pointed out that the *Aparecida* document from the conference of the Latin American bishops went further by calling it „popular spirituality". Bergoglio wrote that as such, popular religious practices and beliefs represent a path along which the Holy Spirit guides millions of the faithful to God – a truly Christian and popular spirituality that should not simply be tolerated but rather strengthened and supported by Church leaders.⁸

The thoughts of Cardinal Bergoglio became official Church magisterium in *Evangelii Gaudium*, which quotes the *Aparecida* document and the idea of popular spirituality expressing the dimension of the *credere in Deum* within the act of faith, and highlights the missionary power and the evangelising value of this spirituality. The apostolic exhortation concludes by defining expressions of popular piety as a „*locus theologicus*" – something that Church teachings and academic reflection need to learn how to read and interpret.

From this perspective, the following sections will try to respond to the call to interpret popular religiosity as an opportunity for evangelisation and a resource for religious education in the Italian Catholic context.

2. A family resource

Pastoral guidelines and documents issued by the Italian Catholic bishops point out that the role of the family is essential to the successful religious instruction of children. This has been a guiding principle in many experiments taking place in various Italian dioceses over the past decade, which have sought to reimagine the process of Christian initiation for children.⁹

Christian communities are the place children's faith is conceived and where that faith can be nurtured and grow.¹⁰ Parents are „primary educators of their children" in the process of religious education and their role is „irreplaceable".¹¹

It is well known that early years are fundamental to the psychological, cognitive and emotional development of children. Naturally the same applies to their spiritual and religious upbringing. In Italy, popular religious practices and rituals are often learned and passed on within the family. The first prayers and gestures of devotion to Mary and the saints are learned at home, often from grandparents. Through the family, children encounter popular religious practices, such as the Christmas nativity scene, pilgrimages and visits to religious shrines, or the rites and processions of Holy Week. It is on the walls of the home, not in churches, that children see sacred images for the first time and become familiar with the stories of the saints. Obviously the way in which this initiation in the symbols and rituals of the Christian tradition occurs should not be ignored or underestimated. So it is surprising that the concluding document of the Italian Bishops' Conference on Christian initiation of children, *Incontriamo Gesù*, does not mention popular piety or popular religiosity and the associated rituals and symbols as a resource for catechesis within the family, especially for children under 6.¹²

8 Bergoglio, Jorge M.: Prefazione. In: Bianchi 2015 [Anm. 3], 15.

9 Conferenza Episcopale Italiana: *Incontriamo Gesù. Orientamenti per l'annuncio e la catechesi in Italia*, 22 maggio 2014 (hereinafter IG), 54.

10 *Congregation for the clergy: General Directory for Catechesis*, 15 August 1997, 257.

11 *Ibid.*, 226.

12 IG, 52–56. This document, nevertheless, speaks of the expressions of popular piety as good opportunities for proclaiming the Gospel, for instance in pilgrimages and shrines (cf. IG 48). A clear reference to popular religiosity in children's Christian initiation is made in the official Catechism of the Italian Bishops' Conference for families with children under 6: „popular devotion" is listed here as the third source of Christian prayer for families, after Holy Scripture and liturgy.

Given the current crisis in sharing the Christian faith and bearing witness to new generations, it seems relevant to highlight how popular religiosity can contribute to the religious education provided by parents and grandparents. These simple forms of prayer are often the only religious heritage that are readily available to modern families. For example, families that ask to have their children baptised – still a clear majority of Italian families – do not regularly attend church services. Educational scientists have shown the importance of rituals for children's cognitive and emotional development: ritual experiences associated with physicality, as in the case of bedtime rituals, family lunches on Sunday, birthday parties, create a space where others become meaningful conversation partners. Remembering these experiences allows children to situate events in space and time, to give them value and meaning, to build cognitive ‚maps‘ to help them get their bearings.¹³

As such, early experiences of religious rituals are a formative part of children encountering the sacred and beginning their relationship with the transcendent sphere. Rituals experienced within popular religiosity can provide an initial semantic framework for the child's relationship with God and the symbols of the Christian tradition. These early-years experiences can be very important and are often the only religious heritage readily accessible to families, who should be the first source of religious education for children. Pope Francis refers to these very resources when he speaks about the role of Christian families: „Faith is God's gift, received in baptism, and not our own work, yet parents are the means that God uses for it to grow and develop. Hence it is beautiful when mothers teach their little children to blow a kiss to Jesus or to Our Lady. How much love there is in that!

13 On the importance of rituals in children's development and education see for instance: *Weikert, Annet: Rituale geben Kindern Halt*, München 1997.

At that moment the child's heart becomes a place of prayer.”¹⁴

Of course, the religious instruction of children in their early years cannot be limited only to popular religious rituals: new, more qualified pastoral care „with and for the adults“ is needed in order to foster their Christian instruction.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the point is that popular religiosity, through its rich, immediate, and simple rituals, represents an important and accessible heritage for communities and families when introducing young children to the Christian faith and life.

3. *A ritual resource*

One of the aims of religious instruction and catechesis of children in a Catholic context is to support them in understanding and experiencing Christian liturgy and sacraments, as they take part in rituals that open them up to experience God and encounter Jesus Christ.¹⁶ Introducing children to rituals cannot be confined to liturgical rituals in the strict sense: even though liturgy and sacraments are considered superior to popular religious rituals and practices,¹⁷ the ritual tradition of the Catholic Church extends beyond liturgical practices. Teaching children about rituals can be therefore enriched by the peculiarity of the Christian tradition expressed by popular religiosity – venerating sacred images, pilgrimages, processions, etc. These popular religious practices can be interpreted as complementary to liturgical practices. Historically, popular religiosity focused more strongly

14 *Pope Francis: Amoris Laetitia*. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on love in the family, 19 March 2016 (hereinafter AL), 287.

15 IG, 59.

16 *Ibid.*, 17.

17 *Second Vatican Council: Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Constitution on the sacred liturgy, 4 December 1963, 13.

on ritual elements that were secondary to official liturgy: emotional, non-verbal and corporeal elements of rituals.¹⁸

Emotional & cognitive. The emotional and cognitive poles are intertwined in people's experience of religious rituals. As Gramsci puts it, the popular element feels but does not always comprehend or know; the intellectual element knows but does not always comprehend and, above all, feel.¹⁹ We can cite two examples of bodily expressions of emotion as a feature of popular religious rituals: hand clapping as an expression of joy and crying as an expression of sadness. These emotions are not uncommon among people taking part in popular religious practices in Italy, for example clapping hands during a procession of the patron saint and crying on Good Friday. Rudolf Otto took the view that religious experience is essentially emotional: the sacred is approached through emotion rather than conceptually, a trembling felt in the presence of the divine.²⁰ This emotional note in popular religious practices may be linked to people's need for 'direct' contact with the divine: in popular religiosity, people prefer the immediacy of the connection with the sacred.²¹ Expressing emotion in a religious ritual is a more immediate, direct way of relating to God than practices centring on cognitive processes. For example, crying in front of a statue of the crucifixion expresses a more immediate and direct connection with the sufferings of Jesus Christ than reading the Gospel narratives of the Passion.

18 *Zaccaria, Francesco*: Participation and beliefs in popular religiosity. An empirical-theological exploration among Italian Catholics, Leiden–Boston 2010, 55–67.

19 *Gramsci, Antonio*: Lettere dal carcere, Torino 1982, 39.

20 *Otto, Rudolf*: Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen, Gotha 1917.

21 *Maldonado, Luis*: Popular religion. Its dimensions, levels and types. In: *Concilium* 22 (1986) 3–11.

Non-verbal & verbal. The dialectics between non-verbal and verbal elements in rituals is expressed through the tension between non-verbal and verbal symbols. Again, the two poles should not to be seen as contradictory: verbal and non-verbal symbols are not mutually exclusive in religious practices. A religious symbol should be regarded as something that joins together (*sympallein*), linking two realities: the worldly and the divine. In popular religiosity, the worldly and the divine are never irreconcilably distant, because they are joined by non-verbal symbols: symbolic places (shrines, tombs of saints, etc.), actions (pilgrimages, processions, festivals, etc.), gestures (kneeling, kissing, touching, etc.), and materials (sacred images, holy water, candles, etc.).²²

Physical & mental. Nor does the distinction between physical and mental elements of rituals contain a contradiction. Mind and body are so interrelated in human beings that we can even talk about the embodied mind.²³ In this dialectic polarity, popular religious practices are characterised by an emphasis on the involvement of the body rather than the mind. Examples include the number of requests for physical healing during pilgrimages to shrines, and the key role of physical actions in popular religious practices: ascending the stairs of a shrine on one's knees, kissing a sacred image, touching the statue of a saint, drinking water from a sacred place, crying and beating the breast during a procession, walking a long distance uphill to reach the goal of a pilgrimage. Of course, this does not mean that popular religious practices do not appeal to or involve the minds of participants: nevertheless they place greater

22 *Panteghini, Giacomo*: La religiosità popolare. Provocazioni culturali ed ecclesiali, Padova 1996.

23 *Lakoff, George / Johnson, Mark*: Philosophy in the flesh. The embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought, New York 1999.

emphasis on the physical side than on the mental side.

The emphases found in popular religiosity enrich the ritual heritage of the Church, which can also benefit religious education and Christian instruction, albeit in conjunction with wisdom and discernment as to which popular religious practices would be helpful for children. An appreciation of the emotional, non-verbal and physical elements of popular religious rituals and their use when introducing children to Christian rituals can complement the cognitive, verbal and mental elements of liturgical and sacramental rituals within the process. In this way, Christian education and instruction programmes can connect more elements of children's lives and they can experience how the Christian faith affects all these elements.

4. A „diffused“ religious resource

Sociological studies have identified the presence of a ‚diffused religion‘ in Italy. The concept ‚diffused‘ has two meanings here. Firstly, this kind of religion is widespread, being common to the majority of Italians; secondly, it is diffused in the sense that it is a form of religiosity which forms part of the national culture and is present among different social strata of the Italian people. This diffused religion is the result of the longstanding presence of the Catholic Church in the country and the Church's wide-ranging religious socialisation activities.²⁴ This common religion, which encompasses different shapes and facets, can be understood as a general sense of belonging to the Catholic Church, but often with some sense of distance from Church practices and teachings. Indeed, the majority of Italians call themselves Catholic, de-

spite the fact that they do not regularly attend church services and have little or no familiarity with church language and teachings.

It is easy to see that the profile of most Italians matches what is referred to in church jargon as ‚lapsed Catholics‘. The majority of people who contact the Church to request the celebration of a sacrament for themselves or their children come from this group. They feel Catholic and want the same for their children, even though usually it is a socio-cultural sense of belonging to the Church – a religious identity linked to family and tradition. Since they are not familiar with the liturgical life and the catechesis programmes of the community, their knowledge of biblical stories, the moral teachings of the church, and the liturgical renewal of the Second Vatican Council is often very limited. Often religious knowledge is confined to simple concepts dating back to religious instruction received during their childhood. Although diffused religion and popular religiosity are not the same thing, the two forms of religiosity often overlap in Italy, both theoretically and empirically. The religious stories and traditions that are present in this common Italian Catholicism are often related to popular religious practices and beliefs, such as devotional gestures and practices associated with sacred images of saints, familiarity with the stories of the saints, taking part in local patron saints' festivals and processions, visiting shrines, and participation in pilgrimages, etc.

This diffused religion can be an opportunity for catechesis, because it gives pastoral workers an opportunity to begin a conversation with ‚lapsed‘ Catholics. Nevertheless, in order for it to be a real resource for Christian initiation of children, pastoral workers need to overcome prejudice: the belief that religious experiences and beliefs of people who do not attend regularly the church are erroneous or distorted. For instance, families who want to have their child baptised may not know much about the sacrament and its theology, but they may have expe-

24 Cipriani, Roberto: Religione e religiosità oggi. In: *Arici, Fausto/Gabbiadini, Rosino/Moscato, Maria T.* (eds.): *La risorsa religione e i suoi dinamismi. Studi multidisciplinari in dialogo*, Milano 2014, 29–42.

rience and knowledge of symbols and rituals, often stemming from popular religious practices, which may do as starting point for pastoral care. Of course, the pastoral process needs to find a balance between a laissez-faire attitude on the one hand and a rigid controlling attitude on the other, i.e. between the desire to teach and share the faith and the need to listen to and respect the conversational partner's story.²⁵

Pope Francis speaks in the following terms about the pastoral opportunities deriving from this diffused and popular religiosity of people who rarely have any contact with the church community:

„It is true that many couples, once married, drop out of the Christian community. Often, however, we ourselves do not take advantage of those occasions when they do return, to remind them of the beautiful ideal of Christian marriage and the support that our parishes can offer them. I think, for example, of the Baptism and First Holy Communion of their children, or the funerals or weddings of their relatives or friends. Almost all married couples reappear on these occasions, and we should take greater advantage of this. Another way of growing closer is by blessing homes or by bringing a pilgrim image of Our Lady to houses in the neighbourhood; this provides an opportunity for a pastoral conversation about the family's situation. It could also be helpful to ask older married couples to help younger couples in the neighbourhood by visiting them and offering guidance in the early years of marriage. Given the pace of life today, most couples cannot attend frequent meetings; still, we cannot restrict our pastoral outreach to small and select groups.“²⁶

Finally, in order to see popular religiosity as a resource for pastoral and educational work, it would appear that church personnel need to change their attitudes. As mentioned previously, *Evangelii Gaudium* calls popular piety a „*locus theologicus*“²⁷. Which means that pastoral workers and educators need to be able to enter an effective two-way conversation with people expressing this type of religiosity; in other words, official religion not only has to give and teach to popular religiosity but also needs to receive and learn from it. Developing a better understanding of popular religiosity is not only a way to bring the Church's pastoral and educational activities closer to the lives of real people, but also a way of detecting the signs of presence of Holy Spirit at work in their life and advances in their knowledge of God. In order to do this, pastoral workers need to express care and affection in this encounter with popular religiosity and, as in all pastoral conversations, be willing to learn from and be transformed by the dialogue.²⁸ As Pope Francis put it, experts and leaders in church and religion need to learn from the poor: “They have much to teach us [...]. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them.”²⁹ Poverty cannot be understood solely in economic terms: people may be poor, for instance, in terms of church language and religious knowledge, but this poverty needs to be heard, interpreted and supported by pastoral workers and religious educators.

25 *Biemmi, Enzo*: Educare al rito e lasciarsi educare dal rito. L'accompagnamento pastorale della domanda dei sacramenti. In: *Biemmi, Enzo* (ed.): I fondamentali della catechesi, Bologna 2013, 149–157.

26 AL, 230. Pope Francis points out how popular piety can be a useful and effective tool for introducing children to Christian ideas within the family: „It is essential that children actually see that, for their

parents, prayer is something truly important. Hence moments of family prayer and acts of devotion can be more powerful for evangelization than any catechism class or sermon.“ (AL, 288)

27 EG, 126.

28 EG, 125.

29 EG, 198.

4. Conclusion

This article has briefly outlined how popular religiosity can be viewed as a resource for religious education and Christian instruction for children in a Catholic context, a process that can and should involve families more. We began by presenting the theological justification for this approach, an approach that does not overlook the potential pitfalls in popular religiosity, but focuses rather on popular religious beliefs and practices as expressions of a true act of faith. Secondly, we examined how popular religious practices can provide a simple and immediate resource for families who want to introduce their children to Christian symbols, rituals and stories; a resource that can help young children to navigate the semantic world of religion and find meaning therein. In this sense, popular religiosity can be a practical and accessible tool for families who want to introduce their children to the faith. We went on to consider how popular religiosity offers a ritual resource for teaching children about the Christian life that is complementary to liturgy: popular religious practices emphasise the emotional, non-verbal and physical elements of rituals, which can help engage

all aspects of the child's awareness in the process of initiation. Finally, we noted the overlap between popular religiosity and 'diffused religion' in Italy, where popular religious symbols, stories and practices are linked to a cultural Catholicism that persists among Italians, even those who rarely take part in the life of church communities. Of course, this form of religiosity can be problematic, but it often creates opportunities for pastoral workers to meet individuals, offer pastoral support and reconnect them with church life.

In order for popular religiosity to be a genuine pastoral and educational resource, church representatives and religious teachers need to undergo a change of heart and mind: they need to see popular religious experiences with new eyes. Popular religiosity should not merely be viewed by church and religious élites as something to be purified or an opportunity for evangelisation, but rather as an expression of the people's faith, where the work of the Holy Spirit within their life needs to be detected and discerned. It should be seen as an invitation from God who speaks and teaches the Church today in many ways, including through the poor and humble.

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