
INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES AND OPINION LEADERS OF ACTIVE CATHOLICS

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Abstract

The paper presents results of the research focused on opinion leaders and interpretive communities of young active Catholics in Slovakia in connection with contemporary ecclesial-societal issues. The author pays a special attention to the Church opinion leaders and the sources of the opinion leaders credibility. She proceeds from a broader research, realized on a sample of 339 respondents from 18 to 40 years old. She is linking her findings with the three current ecclesial-societal issues: the removal of the archbishop Róbert Bezák from office, financial separation of Church and state and clerical celibacy.

Keywords: opinion leaders, interpretive communities, Catholic church, Slovakia, youth

1. Introduction

Generally speaking, social developments are reflected in public opinion and subsequently spark off reactions on the part of individual members of the society. Public opinion and actions of the engaged individuals are a significant matter of interest to those who feel ready to take responsibility for social developments or wish to influence them. Although the church-related social developments represent only a part of general social developments they comprise several publicly debated issues some of which are quite delicate in their nature or even controversial. Therefore the underlying process of the formation of attitudes to church-related social issues is something which deserves to be examined in more detail.

This paper presents the findings of a research into such processes. The research focused on two areas: (1) how the opinions of young engaged Catholics are shaped and (2) what is the impact of interpretive communities and opinion leaders in that process.

Potential opinion leaders usually influence young audiences that are easier to shape and the key attitudes of which may bear fruit in the future. Therefore, attitudes of engaged young people – those interested in broader social developments and their own impact – are of specific importance. For the purpose

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of this paper the term ‘young engaged Catholics’ was defined as Catholics aged between 18 and 40, who subjectively consider themselves ‘engaged’ (this was the primary criterion based on which they received the questionnaire) and objectively pursue an activity in the church and social environment (in the questionnaire various degrees and types of activities were examined).

2. State of the art

The question what impact the environment or individual authorities have on the shaping of opinion of (young engaged) people is closely related to the concepts of interpretive micro-communities and opinion leaders. The most recent scholarly research considers community to be the key sociological concept. It allows us to decipher and understand social processes, especially processes related to communication including media communication. The heart of this concept is the term ‘interpretive community’. I was coined by Fish [1] who noticed that the involvement of the receiver in the construction of the meaning of a text often does not occur solely on individualistic basis but within certain natural communication communities. In addition to interpretive communities and speech communities, Borg [2] discerned a mixed category he called discourse communities. The interpretative and meaning-giving dimension of the community represents one of the three basic characteristics and typological starting points of this theory – along with the dimension of space and the dimensions of social structure. Time (community time) as the so-called ‘fourth dimension’ was later added by Crow and Allan [3].

The interpretative communities theory provides an interesting and fruitful research tool specifically in the area of journalism. As a matter of fact, in a modern media society like ours the contact with media cannot be avoided. Abercrombie and Longhurst [4] call the current media paradigm a spectacle/performance paradigm. This is because media have become a natural part of our lives and help shape the identities of people who are permanently engaged in a kind of ‘performance’ and their own social and cultural activities occur as an actualisation of different roles within that paradigm. With the emergence of new media, the previous process of construction of the meaning of the published and mediated texts was eroded by a growing number of interactive audiences entering the arena – a process which can be explained to a great extent through interpretative communities.

Berkowitz and TerKreust [5] also examined the relation between journalists and their information resources by applying the interpretive communities theory. Specific groups such as sports fans have often been a rewarding focus of interest of several scholars; Wenner [6], for instance, examined the effort of media to create fan groups. Rauch [7] focused on activists as alternative media audiences whose rejection of the mainstream was the key building block of their group identities. The fact that conflict with the mainstream can be sometimes superficial and illusory was proved by Mitra [8] in the example of homosexual bloggers in India. Brewin [9] explored

interpretive communities from the perspective of reform and citizen journalism. Lindlof [10] investigated religious practices in the current American society through the prism of interpretive communities and he also addressed the new situation of religious institutions resulting from contemporary preferences of the public.

Opinion leaders theory is a somewhat older concept and dates back to 1944 when Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet [11] published their concept of two-step flow of communication based on their research into the behaviour of voters during the presidential election in the USA. They found out that media surprisingly had a relatively small impact on the decision of voters compared to informal personal communication within the natural environment of voters. Based thereupon, in 1955 Lazarsfeld and Katz [12] introduced their theory of two-step flow of communication. The essential part of this theory was the concept of opinion leaders – persons who select and process media messages and forward it to audiences with less developed analytical and interpretation skills.

3. Methodology

The research was conducted by the quantitative and qualitative method of questionnaires. We have compiled 27 questions, thereof nine were related to demographic data (gender, age, education, domicile, place of birth) and information about the personal profile of the respondents (relation to God, relation to the Church, engagement in the Church, engagement in the society). The actual research questions focused on three areas: relation to media, relation to opinion authorities (with specific focus on such authorities in the church environment including bishops) and opinion shaping environments.

The impact of the authorities and environments were examined within the context of three concrete Church-related topics: the removal of Archbishop Róbert Bezák, separation of the Church from state, and celibacy. (The removal of Archbishop Róbert Bezák sparked massive and continuous attention of Slovak media and public. Born in 1960, Róbert Bezák is a preacher of the Redemptorist order with a reputation of a popular charismatic missionary. He has led the office of the provincial for 12 years. In 2009, the year he was appointed Archbishop of the Trnava Archdiocese, and Bezák was generally regarded as a reformer, since at the time of his appointment, the diocese faced accusations of fraud and mismanagement of funds. Prior to his appointment, media had drawn a negative image of the personality of the Archbishop Emeritus Ján Sokol, who had been generally viewed as complacent, greedy and self-indulgent person. Media had often emphasized Sokol's controversial opinions on fascism in Slovakia during the 2nd World War. In July 2013, Archbishop Bezák was removed from office by Benedict XVI. The Church refused to disclose the reasons for his removal. Thereafter several internal Church documents leaked to media, Archbishop gave several interviews, and finally, the Vatican expressly banned former Archbishop to communicate with

the media. He currently stays at a retreat centre for emeritus Redemptorist priests in Bussolengo, Italy.)

With respect to each topic, respondents were asked a set of five identical questions: what is their opinion, which individuals helped them shape their opinion, why do they think these persons had an impact on them, and which respected church officials have contributed to shaping their opinion. Three of these questions (opinion, assisting individuals, assisting church authorities) were opened. The remaining two questions were half-opened (i.e. they included a 'none of the above' option).

Here, we will focus on the problem of interpretive communities and opinion leaders. Some of the obtained data will be used only to a limited extent. The relation of respondents to individual media or their opinions on individual topics will not be examined.

The questionnaire was published online [bit.do/dotaznik] on 18 February 2014 and responses were collected until 25 March 2014. The questionnaire was disseminated in cooperation with the following institutions, the members and supporters of which were likely to meet the criteria of our target group: Association of Christian Youth Fellowship (ZKSM), study and formation-orientated Ladislav Hanus Fellowship (SLH) including its offshoot Forum for Culture (F4C) in East Slovakia, Forum for Public Issues (FVO), Catholic news journalists' association Network Slovakia, Forum of Christian Institutions (FKI), evangelisation house Quo Vadis in Bratislava, Christian-Democratic Youth of Slovakia (KDMS), 11 animator schools in Slovakia and Slovak scouting.

We obtained 367 responses thereof 339 complied with the age and catholicity criteria. There were 51% male and 49% female respondents. As to the age structure, respondents aged 30 or less represented a majority (61%), the 18-year olds and people in their thirties, including the above 35 category were the least numerous group (Figure 1).

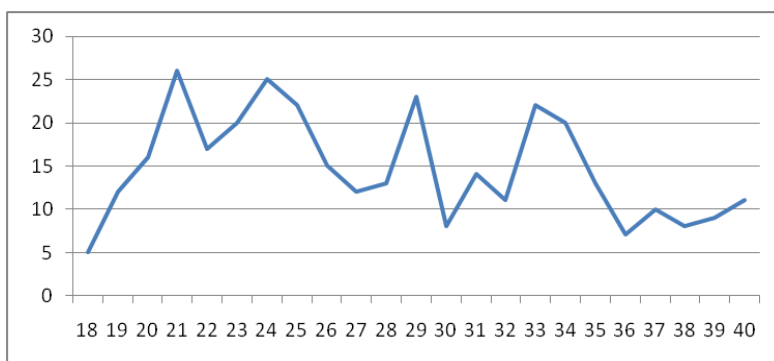


Figure 1. Respondents by age.

As to education, the least numerous group was secondary school graduates without a school leaving exam (2%) and the most numerous (31%) were social sciences university graduates (Magister degree). However, for the sake of clarity, we have joined the two categories of Magister and Engineer

degree holders (both Master's degree equivalents) as well as the secondary school graduates with and without a school leaving exam (Figure 2).

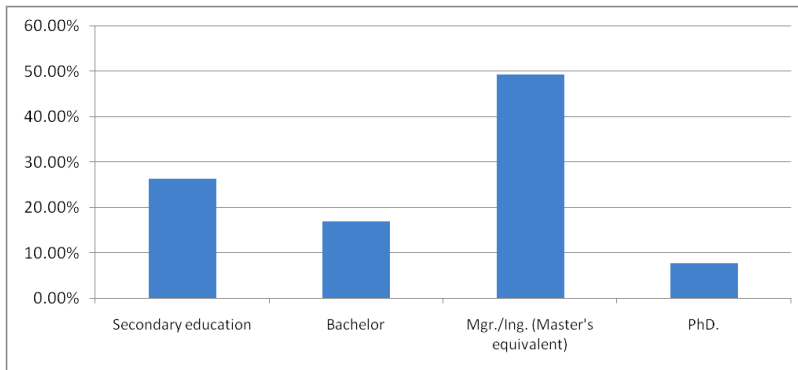


Figure2. Respondents by education.

4. Results

4.1. Opinion leaders

For each of the three current Church-related and social developments, respondents were asked who helps them shape their opinion on the respective topic, i.e. who was an important source of information and inspiration for them. They could state more categories including names of better-known persons, if they found appropriate (Table 1).

More than one fifth of respondents declared full independence in forming opinions on the suggested subjects. They substantiated their opinion by stating that they were following events through media, reading literature, or drawing on their own personal experience and judgement. Many of them refused any influence on their positions and felt offended that someone should shape their own opinions. The most numerous group (more than a quarter) of such independent respondents was recorded in respect of the separation of the Church and state; the least numerous pertained to celibacy (16%).

Priests were clearly the most influential category from among opinion leaders and represent primary shapers of opinions on celibacy. As to the removal of Archbishop Bezák priests were outstripped by the family; the question of separation of the Church and state, priests ended up third.

Friends as an opinion shaping reference group scored 20%, however this was exclusively thanks to their impact on the question of the removal of Archbishop Bezák – their score in other areas was lower.

In a sense, family could be included in the category of opinion shapers with above 20% score, if such broader-family category included mothers, fathers, husbands and wives. However, since many respondents referred to mothers and fathers as ‘parents’, it is not quite correct to simply aggregate the percentages for individual categories. Nevertheless, we did aggregate them to arrive at the figure of 27%. However, this figure should be interpreted with

reference to the limitation described above. The category of family scored best in the case of the removal of Archbishop Bezák. Mothers and fathers played a comparable role, however, in the case of more sophisticated questions, for instance, the separation of the Church the corresponding weights were slightly slanted toward fathers. The situation was significantly different in married couples. References to husbands were considerably more frequent than wives. The resulting ratio was at 30:9. The smallest and the biggest differences were recorded with respect to celibacy (6:3) and separation of the Church (11:2).

Table 1. Opinion leaders.

	Total		Bezák		Separation		Celibacy	
	Number*	Share** (%)	Number	Share (%)	Number	Share (%)	Number	Share (%)
Priests	278	27.34	100	29.50	45	13.27	133	39.23
Family	272	26.75	104	30.68	78	23.01	89	23.60
Broader family	126	12.39	40	11.80	40	11.80	46	13.57
Father	55	5.41	24	7.08	19	5.60	12	3.54
Mother	52	5.11	23	6.78	16	4.72	13	3.83
Husband	30	2.95	13	3.83	11	3.24	6	1.77
Wife	9	0.88	4	1.18	2	0.59	3	0.88
Independent	219	21.53	75	22.12	90	26.55	54	15.93
Friends	208	20.45	86	25.37	59	17.40	63	18.58
Church	83	8.16	30	8.85	10	2.95	43	12.68
Pope	39	3.83	7	2.06	3	0.88	29	8.55
Bishop	22	2.16	16	4.72	3	0.88	3	0.88
Church in general	22	2.16	7	2.06	4	1.18	11	3.24
Community	56	5.51	20	5.90	14	4.13	22	6.49
Bezák	53	5.21	47	13.86	6	1.77	0	0.00
Teachers	26	2.56	4	1.18	12	3.54	11	3.24
People behind the scene	23	2.26	20	5.90	1	0.29	2	0.59
Colleagues	20	1.97	6	1.77	8	2.36	6	1.77
Journalists	19	1.87	12	3.54	7	2.06	0	0.00
Experts	18	1.77	0	0.00	13	3.83	5	1.47
Politicians	10	0.98	4	1.18	6	1.77	0	0.00
Priests who left the church	8	0.79	0	0.00	0	0.00	8	2.36
Schoolmates	5	0.49	1	0.29	2	0.59	2	0.59

Legend: *total number, **average share

The subcategories including the Pope, bishops and the Church (here the term ‘the Church’ means general references of respondents to an abstract authority of the church such as documents, etc.) could form one category, and we would arrive at a figure of approximately 8%. The share of the impact of the Church on the opinions was significantly lower for the separation of the Church and conversely, it was significantly higher for celibacy. As to other categories, small religious fellowships scored above 5% (the so-called meet-ups), the authority of which was slightly higher for celibacy and lower on separation.

The five percent threshold was exceeded by people from behind the scenes for the question of removal of Archbishop Bezák. Respondents referred to people from the Church environment that had more information and helped them to get the whole picture.

As for other categories, the role of teachers, journalists, experts and priests who had left the Church are also worth mentioning. Teachers played a more significant role in the question of separation of the Church and on celibacy. With respect to the case of R. Bezák, teachers had much less impact as opinions shapers. Conversely, respondents relied more on the opinion of journalists. As to the separation of the Church, respondents referred more often to experts, especially those with an economics background. As to the question of celibacy, a specific category of priests who had left the Church turned out to be more relevant, i.e. people with intense personal experience. Similarly, respondents often referred to Greek-Catholic priests – 12 cases in total (8% of all references to priests).

4.2. Interpretive communities

The interpretive communities in which respondents process the messages from media or other sources were examined from two perspectives: in the first stage, respondents were to select from a list of options (family, school, work, parish), and in the second stage, they added their own specific community (Table 2). Those who did not state any environment accounted for 13% on average. The smallest number of such instances (only 5%) was recorded in respect of the removal of R. Bezák and the highest score (18%) in respect of the question of separation of the Church.

Table 2. Interpretive communities.

	Total		Bezák		Separation		Celibacy	
	Num.	(%)	Num.	(%)	Num.	(%)	Num.	(%)
Parish	511	50.25	165	48.67	154	45.43	192	56.64
Family	476	46.80	171	50.44	151	44.54	154	45.43
Work/school	260	25.57	77	22.71	101	29.79	82	24.19
Work	131	12.88	43	12.68	53	15.63	35	10.32
School	129	12.68	34	10.03	48	14.16	47	13.86
Friends	77	7.57	31	9.14	27	7.96	19	5.60
Ladislav Hanus Fellowship	30	2.95	13	3.83	11	3.24	6	1.77
People from behind the scenes	15	1.47	7	2.06	6	1.77	2	0.59
Citizens' associations	12	1.18	6	1.77	4	1.18	2	0.59
N/A	133	13.08	18	5.31	61	17.99	54	15.93

About a half of the respondents opted for parish and family. From those who selected either of these two, about one third stated both, one third opted for family and just over one third for the parish. As for separation of the Church and celibacy, family was not mentioned so frequently. Here, a quarter of respondents opted for work or school. These environments work best for the separation, but simultaneously, they have the least impact on the shaping of opinions on the removal of Archbishop Bezák.

The category of friends dominated the set of freely answered responses. Citizens' associations, other non-governmental organizations and initiated people (i.e. people from behind the scenes or with their own personal experience) accounted for above 1%.

From among all organisations we approached during the dissemination of the questionnaire (Association of Christian Youth Fellowship (ZKSM), study and formation-orientated Ladislav Hanus Fellowship (SLH) including its offshoot Forum for Culture (F4C) in East Slovakia, Forum for Public Issues (FVO), Catholic news journalists' association Network Slovakia, Forum of Christian Institutions (FKI), evangelisation house Quo Vadis in Bratislava, Christian-Democratic Youth of Slovakia (KDMS), 11 animator schools in Slovakia, Slovak scouting), the only association mentioned more than once was Ladislav Hanus Fellowship. (Ladislav Hanus Fellowship is a Catholic academic study/formative community founded in 2002 and inspired by the Washington-based Witherspoon Fellowship. The mission of Ladislav Hanus Fellowship is to shape the future leaders of social life in Slovakia by educating its members in moral and political philosophy and Christian culture. In addition to academic dimension, its activities also extend to spiritual, cultural and social spheres. Currently it has about 300 members.)

It can be concluded that in addition to the classical interpretive communities (family, school, work, friends) an important role in shaping opinions on the Church-related topics is the parish, which is even the most influential of all interpretive groups. This is evidence of either a huge significance of various small spiritual fellowships which young people attend within the parishes, or, the power of internal parish activities. These small circles also represent crucial opinion shapers for most of the people actively engaged in various other religious or civic institutions. Our research also points to a special significance of the academic and formative voluntary association entitled Ladislav Hanus Fellowship, which has been active in formation of young Christian leaders in Slovakia since 2002.

4.3. *Credibility of opinion shapers*

Why is it that the opinion shapers are credible in the eyes of young engaged Catholics? Respondents were to answer the question by choosing from among four options (knowledge, personally maturity, spiritual depth, good character). Alternatively, they could add their own answer (Table 3).

About one third of respondents refused to answer this question, with the smallest share of them related to the removal of R. Bezák (less than 20%) and the highest share related to the separation of the Church (more than 40%).

Table 3. Credibility of opinion shapers.

	Total		Bezák		Separation		Celibacy	
	Num.	(%)	Num.	(%)	Num.	(%)	Num.	(%)
Mature	452	44.53	181	53.39	124	36.58	147	43.36
Knowledgeable	444	43.75	182	53.69	143	42.18	119	35.10
Deep	354	34.87	136	40.12	79	23.30	139	41.00
Good	220	21.67	86	25.37	59	17.40	75	22.12
Experienced	37	3.64	13	3.83	9	2.65	15	4.42
Authority	17	1.68	12	3.54	3	0.88	2	0.59
Seeker	15	1.48	7	2.06	4	1.18	4	1.18
N/A	316	31.13	63	18.58	139	41.00	114	33.63

The most significant factors in the perception of opinion shapers by young Catholics turned out to be knowledge and personal maturity. For the case of R. Bezák, both categories were significant and equally represented. As to the separation of the Church, knowledge was considered a more important factor, as was maturity for shaping opinions on celibacy. Spiritual depth was very important in respect of the removal of the Archbishop and celibacy. Conversely, spiritual depth was less important in respect of the separation of the Church – just as human goodness. Thus, it may be concluded that for more sophisticated topics, information is the primary factor – at the expense of maturity, depth and goodness. These three factors are considered crucial particularly in the more emotional and heated debates.

As to additional specific factors stated by respondents, the most significant was personal experience with the given subject. It had the strongest impact on the shaping of opinion on celibacy, and the least on separation. With respect to the removal of Archbishop Bezák, respondents also based their opinions on the authority of their opinion shapers; i.e. their credibility bound to the gravity of the office, which they represented, and which could not be questioned. In the case of Archbishop Bezák references to opinion shapers as ‘seekers’ were the most frequent – respondents emphasised, for instance, that their opinion leader was an open-minded person who honestly seeks the truth. The factor analysis provided the following three clearly overriding categories of the characteristics of opinion shapers: pre-defined, seeking, and authorities.

The first category with convincingly high correlation coefficients includes respondents who selected all of the pre-defined categories that respondents could choose from (informed, good, mature and deep). These respondents clearly regarded the combination of the given four qualities as decisive for their opinion shapers’ credibility. The second category includes respondents who in each of the three topics valued most the ‘seeking spirit’ in their opinion shapers. Respondents of the third category, on the other hand, emphasised the authority

of the office of the Church, which they are happy to rely on. Personal experience was not applied in any of the thus examined overriding categories.

The reasons for credibility of opinion shapers were aligned to individual opinions of the respondents on three examined topics: the removal of Archbishop R. Bezák, financial separation of the Church from state and priestly celibacy. Naturally, groups with small number of respondents differed greatly from the average, particularly the groups who appreciated seeking character, experience or personal authority. With respect to the removal of R. Bezák, respondents appreciating the authority of the opinion shapers put more emphasis on pride and disobedience of the Archbishop (25% compared to 8%) and the authority of Rome (42% compared to 14%). Conversely, feeling of injustice was perceived to a significantly lesser extent (8% compared to 44%). Respondents who valued seeking character in their opinion shapers also reproached the Archbishop for disobedience (29% compared to 8%), but at the same time they also pointed to an unjust process of removal (57% compared to 44%) and the failed approach to this case on the part of the whole Church (14% compared to 6%). Respondents who welcomed experience in their opinion leaders had a significantly higher perception of injustice (69% compared to 44%) and blamed both parties of the conflict (15% compared to 8%). On the other hand, they made no reference to the Archbishop's pride or disobedience (0% compared to 8%) and their propensity for unquestionable authority of Rome was also below average (8% compared to 14%).

In larger groups of respondents, the deviations from the average were smaller. Overall, it can be concluded that in all categories, the opinion that the removal of R. Bezák was unjust, prevailed (with a stronger support on the part those who valued goodness in their opinion leaders: 55% compared to 44%; average: 49%). At the same time, this group had a slightly stronger reproach against the Church for failure to manage this case (8% on average compared to 6%). There were not many voices who would agree with the phrase 'when Rome speaks, there's nothing more to be discussed' (again, with the least occurrence in respondents seeking goodness in their opinion shapers: 10% compared to 14%; average: 12%). These respondents were considerably less represented in categories 'we are confused' (10% on average compared to 14%) and 'no comment' category (1% on average compared to 3%).

With respect to the separation of the Church from state the most radical respondents were those appreciating authority in their opinion shapers – two thirds of them stated an emphatic No to this question with one third gave an emphatic Yes. Respondents appreciating experience in their opinion shapers hovered around the average, with opinions slightly more tilted against separation – at the expense of a lack of familiarity with the topic. Respondents who valued the truth-seeking dimension in their opinion shapers clearly favoured separation (definitely in favour: 50%; more in favour: 50%).

Again, more numerous categories of respondents were significantly less confused (5% on average compared to 18%). Their opinions against the separation converged to average, whereas opinions in favour of the separation of

the Church grew (67% on average compared to 56%). The most radical concurrence with the separation was voiced by those who value personal maturity in their opinion leaders (70%).

The question of celibacy divided respondents from the minority groups into two categories. All of those who thought highly about their opinion shapers due to their authority supported the preservation of the current status quo. As to others, the ratio of praising the celibacy and making it voluntary was at about 1:1, which can be distinguished from the average ratio of 1:2 in favour of keeping celibacy compulsory.

Respondents who trusted opinion leaders due to their spiritual depth, maturity, knowledge and goodness, reached an above-average score in familiarity with the topic (2% compared to 4%). The requirement of making celibacy voluntary was at about average for this group. As to the perceived usefulness and noble nature of celibacy, this group also attained an above-average score (65% compared to 61%), in that celibacy was most valued by those who appreciated spiritual depth and personal maturity in their opinion shapers (67% on average).

5. Discussion

The presented data, information and results of statistical testing were examined in more detail to arrive at a more profound interpretation.

When examining opinion leaders it was found that more than one fifth of young engaged Catholics do not follow any of them and are fully confident to form opinions independently. Those who referred to any opinion shapers clearly preferred priests and members of their family (both categories with a more or less equal score of 27%), followed by friends (approx. 20%), with a bit of a lag, the Church (8%) and small religious communities (6%). Specific opinion leaders shaping opinions on the removal of R. Bezák included people from behind the scenes, journalists and publicly better known figures; opinions on separation of the Church were also shaped by experts and for the question of celibacy, these were priests who left the Church and Greek-Catholic priests, i.e. people with personal experience.

It can be concluded that opinion authorities play their role based on three competences: expertise, teaching, and emotions.

Expertise is related to people regarded as experts (economists, theologians, etc.) and teachers, who exercise their authority proportionate to the level of required expertise on the given topic. However, they generally attain a relatively small share on the shaping of opinions of young engaged Catholics compared to other opinion shapers.

The teaching authority of the Church is an obvious fact (Pope, bishops, priests, Church as such through documents, etc.). It is clear that the most influential bearers of the authority are definitely priests, however their authority is also based on personal experience (i.e. emotional type of influence), and therefore it cannot be identified exclusively with the teaching authority of the

Church. A significant disproportion was identified between the authority of priests and other bearers of the teaching authority (priests 27%, others 2–4%). This type of authority was exercised significantly more often in respect of celibacy than in the Church-related topic such as the separation of the Church.

An authority based on emotions is an authority derived from strong personal ties or somehow related to the emotional element of an event or topic. It was shown that this type of authority was related mainly to an acute case strongly perceived and closely followed by the society. This was the right kind of ambience for the authority of friends, family, people personally connected to the case who have their own personal experience. Within such a setting, more attention was paid also to journalists, especially specific persons who made public statements on the topic and openly expressed their opinion.

Opinion authorities based on emotional footing have clearly proved to be the most influential.

With respect to the opinion shaping process, a special focus was laid on the roles of men and women. Within families, the authority is relatively equally divided between fathers and mothers. However, it is clearly skewed towards husbands rather than wives. This pattern was particularly evident in more sophisticated topics (separation) with fathers clearly outweighing mothers. The most influential category of opinion leaders (priests) is exclusively masculine, the remaining groups are mixed (stated differently, the share of male and female cannot be determined without further examination). Another related pattern worth mentioning is that there was no female among the specific persons quoted by respondents.

Thus, it seems that males maintain an overwhelming superiority over females in terms of opinion leadership.

The significance of emotional consent with opinion leaders was vindicated also through identification of reasons of the authorities: the key to become an opinion leader for young engaged Catholics seems to be a combination of personal maturity, spiritual depth, goodness and knowledge. In the case of celibacy, personal experience was also highlighted and in the case of removal of R. Bezák, it was the authority and the personal disposition of a seeker. Interestingly, the bearers of authority and seekers represented two opposite extremes: the former led their disciples to obedience, fidelity and acceptance of status quo; the latter taught them to take a critical stance on particular matters and not to be afraid of innovative approaches.

6. Conclusions

It can be concluded that the opinions of young Slovak engaged Catholics on current church and social topics are formed almost exclusively in the most natural environments for each human being: family, among friends, work and school. However, family as the most frequent shaping environment is also accompanied by parish. There are not many interpretive communities that would be a proof of an additional or a higher level of engagement of young Catholics.

Whereas the importance of parish or family for shaping opinion is quoted by a half of the engaged Catholic youth, all forms of more intense contact with social events only add up to about a one tenth of that score (6%).

Within these interpretive communities, the natural opinion leadership of young Catholics is borne by individual priests, family members and friends. Thus, the office-derived authority of priests is mixed with the authority derived from personal contact. It is exactly this personal, emotional aspect of the threefold relation Subject – Opinion Leader – Social Problem that has definitely proved to be the decisive source of authority and formative power. Both the authority based on the office of the Church and the authority based on expertise lagged behind significantly. Expertise was more significant in more sophisticated topics such as the financial separation of the Church from state. The credibility of opinion leaders in the eyes of young engaged Catholics is derived mainly from personal maturity and greater knowledge, as well as spiritual depth and human goodness. Thus the significance of personal emotional relations is vindicated. An interesting polarity worth further, more detailed research was the view of engaged Catholics on the seeking disposition of their opinion shapers on one hand (honest truth seekers focused on discerning) and the prescribed authority which is a guarantee of correctness (obedience pays off, excessive speculation should be avoided). On the other hand, it seems that all more-or-less agree on the need for maturity, depth, goodness and knowledge. It is these two different approaches to the sources of credibility which might imply two different ways to evaluate (also) the Church-related social events.

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