



BETH



**BETH Bulletin
2024**

No 02

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Identity and Mission of Church Libraries in Europe

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The European society in which the libraries of the Church in Europe operate is a complex society: under stress from different points of view, inequitable, and facing major technological, economic, and political changes.

It would not be fair to state categorically that in this first half of the 21st century, we have been left with a more difficult society than others in the past. It is enough to look at the history of the 20th century to glimpse particularly dark times for the development of an egalitarian, pacified Europe.

The different Christian Churches have had and still have the mission to bring the Gospel to those societies to which they belong with the aim of building communities where the Kingdom of God becomes more visible. This will only be possible if all the members of these Christian communities are capable of taking up the challenges that correspond to us on this path, each one from our own sphere of action. It is good to remember that this task does not belong only to the consecrated, or to specific pastoral groups. It involves every baptised person and everyone who has a responsibility in the work of, for example, an institution of the Church, such as its libraries.

It is a matter of realising that we all have an important mission in the development of more fraternal communities, and that they perceive that from their respective Churches, we are working towards this goal.

Church Libraries: What Are We Talking about?

Our association is made up of different types of church libraries belonging to different Christian churches. Since its foundation, the ecumenical vision has been one of the hallmarks of the association (BETH, n.d.). Church libraries in Europe are mainly of the following types: university, diocesan, convent, seminary, patrimonial, and religious orders. They are not watertight compartments: for example, we find diocesan libraries which are also heritage libraries, or seminary libraries attached to faculties of theology.

The national associations that make up BETH represent some 1500 libraries spread across the length and breadth of old Europe. We are depositaries of an immense theological-religious bibliographical heritage which we work to preserve and disseminate. We have associations at our national level, and at the European level through BETH. We weave networks and synergies with both the public and private spheres to provide a quality service to our communities. For years we have been taking steps to improve our catalogues and make advancements in the professional training of librarians, taking an important personal involvement in the different projects we carry out. This is done in many countries where material, economic, and human resources for Church libraries are decreasing. One could say that there is a strong vocational component and commitment in many of the people who work in them.

It is also the case that (whilst recognising differences depending on the reality of each country) Church libraries have had very little visibility and presence in the professional library/librarian field. We are often little known, little valued, and finding difficulties entering into collaboration and being taken into account by the public sector. This reality is gradually changing thanks to the efforts of many institutions and their staff to participate in projects, to present collective catalogues that highlight the rich heritage we hold, and to support teaching and research.

In a Complex Europe

As we are well aware, the mission to be carried out as institutions of the Church takes place in the society in which we live. We often look to the past with nostalgia, emphasising past times and valuing them as better than the ones we live in. Each era has its values and its difficulties and we tend to say, like the poet, "in our opinion, any time past was better" (Manrique 2011).

In previous centuries the Church's view of the world was tinged with constant suspicion. Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in the Catholic sphere, this view has gradually changed: the world is the place of God's salvific action, and the place where the Church must accompany the yearnings and hopes of the human race:

The joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the people of our time, especially the poor and those who suffer, are at the same time the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of Christ's disciples. There is nothing truly human that does not find an echo in his heart (Pope Paul VI, 1964).

And what is the Europe in which the Church's libraries are inserted? We do not intend in any way to make an exhaustive sociological, political, or economic analysis, but we do intend to point out some global characteristics that mark in some way the configuration of what today – and in the coming decades – constitutes the European space.

A war at the heart of the continent.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is striking at the heart of the European project of stability, peace, and development. According to UNHCR figures, more than 6.3 million people have had to flee from Ukraine, escaping the horror of war, poverty, and destruction. This represents a humanitarian challenge of the first order, where selfless welcome should be the policy that prevails in all our countries. From BETH we have been aware of the harsh reality that our fellow librarians are going through, and their situation does not leave us indifferent.

Political polarisation

In many European countries, there is a general disaffection towards the political class, in a context of strong polarisation and difficulties in reaching global agreements. This is leading to tense societies, where differences are widening and the consensus is diminishing. Likewise, it is no trivial matter that a large part of the citizenry has little appreciation for the shared European project, which is becoming increasingly disfigured.

Miscegenation and multiculturalism

Our countries are taking shape as realities in which miscegenation and multiculturalism are signs of the identity of our societies. Migratory flows and increasing mobility mean that our communities are changing. This is a value that enriches them and is also a challenge for our library work. Here we can find one of the signs and missions of Christian institutions: to be welcoming communities. A multi-speed Europe with a high level of technological development. Europe's economic development is not homogeneous. It takes place at various speeds. There are many differences between, and within, countries. We will also have to redouble our efforts to make our library institutions areas where equality and the defence of the weakest are priority areas in our projects in line with the Gospel. At the same time, we are witnessing technological development like never before. This poses challenges to our libraries, which have been discussed at our meetings and conferences. Witnessing the development of Artificial Intelligence, for example, poses new technical challenges but also raises questions in the field of ethics, which we will have to examine in depth.

The place of religion in European societies (Zazo Jiménez 2021)

The classical narrative of secularisation asserts that a process has been taking place in Europe for decades whereby the past is identified as a time of great religiosity and the present and future as a time where the fact of religion is diminishing or disappearing. Belief rates and religious practice are indeed on a downward trend according to various socio-religious studies. But, whilst this decline is documented,

the issue is more complex than affirming what the classical secularisation narrative has advocated regarding the near disappearance of religion in Europe. Here we can make a few assertions:

- It is doubtful that religion has ever had a **more important weight** than at present.
- This real situation does **not necessarily determine** (because it does not take into account the contingencies inherent in human life) a reality of the complete disappearance of religion from the European space.
- An increasing number of citizens **no longer trust traditional religious institutions** as the sole providers of meaning.
- The modulation of this secularisation process is **very uneven** from country to country: in France and the Czech Republic, almost half of the population declares itself atheist, agnostic, or indifferent to religions, while in countries such as Romania and Poland, religious practice and belief rates are higher than the European average.
- We are witnessing an increase in the number of **non-Christian religions** in Europe that are **embedded in society**, which challenges the classic narrative of secularisation.
- **Christian religious institutions**, despite the observed stagnation, are **strongly rooted in European society through an immense cultural, symbolic, and material heritage**. As a consequence, we can speak of a diffuse Christian cultural identity, beyond the rates of religious practice and belief.

Danièle Hervieu-Léger uses the term "belonging without belief" to refer to this reality: an individual cannot deny his or her belonging to Christianity in general, and to the Christian confession of his or her country in particular, where they continue to attend certain rites such as baptism, marriage, funerals, and consider it a source of diffuse cultural identity, despite professing to not believe in dogmas, and having no religious praxis (2005, 137). In short, we can affirm that the classical narrative of secularisation does not hold as it stands. Christianity still has an enormous material and symbolic heritage in Europe, and this is compounded by the rise and presence of other non-Christian religions, which started almost from scratch in many European countries.

A Look at the Mission of Church Libraries and their Librarians

Looking at the mission we have as librarians of European Christian churches, we want to emphasise the specificity of being Christians and belonging to Christian institutions. There will certainly be nuances in attitudes across the board, but also commonalities, and global visions of the library service that help to remind us of the mission we are entrusted with. We take it for granted that a librarian in one of our institutions will possess the technical and scientific training related to the world of librarianship as any colleague in a public library. In addition, a knowledge of theology or religious sciences certainly adds to the work of a church librarian. It helps to understand the meaning that cultural heritage has for the Christian faith and to have a vision of the different subjects that make up the theological field.

A few paths to follow:

- Conserving our **rich bibliographical heritage and disseminating it** by placing it at the service of society, facilitating research and helping ecumenical dialogue.
- Promoting spaces for **fraternal cultural dialogue** through our own activities, or by joining community initiatives which favour these objectives.
- Ensuring the objectives of our library are **aligned with the objectives** of the church to which we belong in our local reality. The library cannot stand apart from them. To this end, it must be made easier for librarians to coordinate and have a voice in the co-responsibility bodies of each institution. We must avoid the potentially likely scenario of a library having a low valuation in the eyes of the institution to which it belongs, resulting in limited resources.
- Making it possible for library spaces to be, as far as possible, **welcoming spaces** where different people can come together for various reasons.
- Being disseminators of Christian culture without complexes, **supporting the pastoral and evangelising work in our communities**.
- Committing to the **presence of Christian symbols in our libraries**, on our websites and on social networks, of images and messages that deepen and promote spirituality makes visible the type of institution we are and what we want to offer.
- Entering into **dialogue with our library users**. We have all had (or could have) experiences where users perceive (or are able to perceive) from our attitude towards them, from our words and help, the face of a Christian community that wants to be attentive to their needs.

- Offering up recommendations from our wealth of resources. In our bibliographic collections, we have real gems of Christian spirituality, hagiographies, church history, etc., which can help people who come to us looking for answers. Why not offer them up in newsletters or other recommendations?

The participation of the library in the social fabric of its community should be a **priority action**: it is or can be one of the spaces where social life takes place, and it is an opportunity to create synergies, contribute to our vision, and grow as a community. The **coordination of the library with other church bodies is necessary** not only to give visibility to the library, but to help us better understand the needs of the community. Let us think for example of the groups in charge of caring for the sick, of social and charitable activities, of family and youth ministry, etc. The added value and knowledge that these groups can provide will help us to programme activities that will help them in their work, and so too increase traffic to our spaces at the same time.

There is no doubt that we are witnessing difficult times at various levels in our libraries. We know the problems that many are going through. But our work remains fundamental as Christian libraries. Let us be able to infect ourselves with something inherent in the Christian faith: hope. Not as a discourse out of touch with reality, but as a conviction that we are not alone on the way.

"And behold I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Mt 28, 20).

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