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Rev. Damian Wąsek, PhD hab., prof. UPJPII

Review of the PhD thesis by Emmanuel Oppong Okrah entitled:

MORAL MESSAGES IN THE PASTORAL LETTERS

OF THE BISHOPS OF GHANA (1992–2025)

written under the supervision of Rev. prof. PhD hab. Krzysztof Kietliński,

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The Magisterium of the Church has always taught not only by formulating principles of faith and morality, but also by applying them to the concrete problems faced by individuals, societies, and successive generations. Yet more difficult than formulating such teaching is the question of what happens to it afterwards: whether it actually reaches its intended audience, whether it is understood, whether it shapes people's ways of thinking and making decisions, and ultimately whether it leads to a genuine transformation of life. Between the promulgation of a document and its reception within the ecclesial community lies a space that cannot be explored through textual analysis alone.

This tension becomes particularly interesting in the case of pastoral letters. They are written not merely to articulate the position of bishops, but above all to have an impact: to form consciences, interpret events, evaluate social phenomena, and inspire concrete attitudes and actions. The question of the moral message contained in pastoral letters is therefore ultimately also a question about the journey of magisterial teaching from text to life, from its formulation by the pastors of the Church to its reception by the community of believers. It is precisely within this space that Rev. Emmanuel Oppong Okrah's doctoral dissertation, *Moral Messages in the Pastoral Letters of the Bishops of Ghana (1992–2025)*, is situated.

1. Aim, sources, structure and methodology of the thesis

The aim of the dissertation is ambitious and corresponds well to the multifaceted character of the research problem. The author does not limit himself to reconstructing the moral

message of the pastoral letters of the Ghanaian bishops from 1992 to 2025, but also seeks to examine their reception and practical implementation by the clergy and to identify the factors influencing the effectiveness of this teaching. Such an approach makes it possible to combine the analysis of the normative content of episcopal documents with the question of their actual functioning in pastoral practice. Particularly valuable is the inclusion of the empirical dimension of reception, which the author presents as the principal original contribution of the study.

The source base reflects the complex nature of the project. Its principal corpus consists of selected pastoral letters of the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference, analysed in relation to magisterial documents, theological literature, and studies concerning the social, political, and cultural context of Ghana. An important additional source is the material gathered by the author through his own empirical research among clergy. While the breadth of the material deserves recognition, the criteria governing the selection of the pastoral letters should be stated with particular precision, as should the extent to which the empirical findings permit broader conclusions concerning the Church in Ghana.

The structure of the dissertation is logical and transparent. The successive chapters lead from the theological foundations of pastoral letters and the socio-moral context of Ghana, through the analysis of their principal moral themes, to an investigation of clergy reception and finally to practical pastoral proposals. Particularly successful is the interrelation of the final three chapters, thanks to which the recommendations concerning the more effective communication of episcopal teaching emerge both from textual analysis and from research into its actual pastoral reception.

The choice of methods is generally appropriate to the aims and structure of the dissertation. The author combines moral-theological and critical analysis, a descriptive method, thematic analysis, comparative analysis, and empirical research. The interdisciplinary character of this methodology is justified by the subject matter and may be regarded as one of the significant strengths of the study. The methodology of the empirical section, however, requires particularly careful assessment, since it provides the basis for the declared originality of the dissertation and for a number of its most important conclusions.

There can be no doubt that the aim, content, and structure of the dissertation correspond well to its title: *Moral Messages in the Pastoral Letters of the Bishops of Ghana (1992–2025)*. Reading the dissertation, one is struck by the breadth of the author's perspective. He does not limit himself to identifying and systematizing the moral issues addressed in the pastoral letters, but places them within their theological, ecclesial, social, political, and cultural contexts, and subsequently asks about their actual reception and implementation in pastoral practice. In this respect, the dissertation goes beyond a study of episcopal documents and becomes, at certain points, a broader reflection on the relationship between magisterial moral teaching and the lived reality of the local Church. This broad perspective, together with the attempt to integrate theological analysis and empirical research, demonstrates the PhD student's solid preparation, intellectual openness, and ability to approach moral-theological questions from different and complementary perspectives.

2. Structure of the thesis

Emmanuel Oppong Okrah's dissertation consists of a list of abbreviations used, a general introduction, five chapters, a general conclusion, and a bibliography.

The General Introduction provides a broad presentation of the subject matter of the dissertation and clearly establishes the framework of the research. The author explains the theological and pastoral significance of episcopal pastoral letters, situates the study within the socio-political context of Ghana, identifies the research problem and gaps in existing scholarship, and then formulates the aims and research questions. He also presents the sources, methods employed, structure of the dissertation, and its intended original contribution. Particular appreciation is due to the clear identification of the *novum* of the dissertation, namely its attempt to move beyond an analysis of the content of episcopal documents by empirically examining their reception and implementation by the clergy in pastoral practice.

The General Introduction therefore contains all the essential elements expected of this part of a doctoral dissertation, is logically structured, and deserves a very positive assessment. As already mentioned, however, one point requires further clarification: the criteria for selecting the source material. The author announces an analysis of *selected* pastoral letters from the period 1992–2025, but does not sufficiently explain why these particular documents were chosen or according to what criteria the selection was made.

Chapter One, entitled *Pastoral Letters and Their Theological Role*, provides the theological and ecclesiological foundation for the analyses that follow. The author begins by defining the nature, purpose, and historical development of pastoral letters, then presents their biblical and magisterial foundations, analyses their significance for Catholic moral doctrine and social teaching, and finally focuses on the ethical and theological dimensions of these documents and their role in the moral formation of the faithful and society. In this way, the chapter addresses the first research question concerning the development of pastoral letters in the Church and their significance for communicating moral values.

I assess this chapter positively, particularly because of its foundational role in the dissertation as a whole. The author rightly does not proceed directly to an analysis of the documents of the Ghanaian episcopate, but first clarifies the theological status of pastoral letters and situates them within the broader context of the bishops' teaching ministry. Particularly important is the connection established between the pastoral character of these documents and doctrinal authority, as well as the presentation of their twofold function: communicating moral teaching and forming the consciences of the faithful. The chapter therefore provides the necessary theological categories for the subsequent evaluation of the content and reception of the pastoral letters of the bishops of Ghana and fulfils its role within the overall structure of the dissertation well. It is logically structured, covers the most important aspects of the theological status of pastoral letters, and provides a solid foundation for the analyses undertaken in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter Two, entitled *Socio-Moral Issues in Ghana*, serves to present the social, cultural, and moral context within which the subsequent teaching of the Ghanaian bishops should be interpreted. The author begins by describing Ghana's contemporary moral landscape, taking into account its cultural and religious, political and economic conditions, as well as issues

of social justice and human rights. He then focuses on three problems identified as particularly significant: corruption, economic inequality, and moral relativism, analysing their impact on national development, social cohesion, and trust in institutions and leadership.

I assess this chapter positively, above all because of its important contextual function. An analysis of the pastoral letters would not be fully comprehensible without an understanding of the specific social and moral problems to which the bishops respond. The author also demonstrates that these problems do not exist in isolation but are interconnected: corruption weakens institutions and social trust, economic inequality deepens injustice, while moral relativism – as understood in the dissertation – contributes to the weakening of shared ethical norms. The breadth of the perspective adopted also deserves recognition, as it encompasses the interaction between traditional Ghanaian values, religion, globalization, cultural transformations, and political and economic structures.

Chapter Two therefore fulfils its role within the overall structure of the dissertation well: it provides the socio-moral background necessary to understand why particular issues become the subject of interventions by the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference in the pastoral letters analysed in the subsequent chapter. Its structure is logical, and the progression from a general presentation of the context to specific problems and their social consequences is clear. Particularly valuable is the fact that the author does not limit himself to describing individual phenomena but attempts to demonstrate their interconnections and consequences for social life.

Chapter Three, entitled *Analysis of Selected Pastoral Letters (1992–2025)*, constitutes the main analytical core of the dissertation. Here, the author moves from the theological foundations and the socio-moral context of Ghana presented in the preceding chapters to a direct analysis of the teaching of the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference. Using content analysis, he organizes the selected pastoral letters, communiqués, and memoranda issued between 1992 and 2025 around four major thematic areas: justice and peace, environment and climate, moral decadence, and family and sexuality. Within these areas, the author relates the bishops' teaching to the principles of Catholic Social Teaching and situates it within the changing social context of Ghana.

I assess this chapter highly, since it is here that the author most directly addresses the central subject indicated in the title of the dissertation. Particularly commendable is the thematic rather than merely chronological organization of the material. This approach makes it possible not only to present the bishops' positions on particular issues but also to identify continuity and development in their teaching over more than three decades. Another strength is the decision to precede the analysis of particular groups of documents with a presentation of the broader perspective of Catholic teaching. This is especially evident in the sections devoted to justice and peace, environmental stewardship, and moral decadence. Consequently, the statements of the Ghanaian episcopate are not treated as isolated positions but are situated within the broader context of the Church's teaching.

Chapter Three thus successfully brings together the two perspectives developed in the preceding parts of the dissertation: the theological perspective of Chapter One and the socio-cultural perspective of Chapter Two. The author demonstrates how the bishops apply general moral and social principles to specific problems of Ghanaian society – from justice, peace, and

human rights, through environmental protection, to moral education, marriage, and sexuality. This makes the chapter a natural bridge between the theoretical and contextual part of the dissertation and the subsequent empirical investigation into the reception of this teaching among the clergy.

I do, however, notice a certain structural inconsistency in the final section of the chapter. The discussions of justice and peace, environment and climate, and moral decadence are each preceded by a presentation of the relevant doctrinal perspective of the Church. In the section devoted to family and sexuality, however, such an introduction is missing: the author proceeds directly to the analysis of particular documents of the Ghanaian episcopate. For the sake of methodological and structural consistency, it would have been appropriate to precede this section as well with a synthetic presentation of Catholic teaching on marriage, family, and human sexuality, which would provide a clear doctrinal point of reference for the subsequent analysis of the documents of the Ghanaian bishops.

Chapter Four, entitled *Reception and Impact of Pastoral Letters Among the Clergy in Ghana*, constitutes the most original part of the dissertation, since it moves from the analysis of the content of episcopal documents to an empirical investigation of their reception and functioning in pastoral practice. On the basis of research conducted among the clergy, the author examines how pastoral letters are understood and interpreted, their relevance to local pastoral contexts, and the factors influencing their reception. He then analyses the ways in which they are used in preaching, catechesis, and parish programmes, the perceived response of the laity, and their perceived influence on the moral attitudes and behaviour of the faithful. Separate attention is devoted to difficulties in interpreting and implementing the letters, as well as to the clergy's own proposals for increasing their effectiveness.

I assess this chapter very highly, above all because of its attempt to move beyond the analysis of teaching itself towards an investigation of its actual reception. Particularly valuable is the treatment of the clergy as mediators between episcopal teaching and the moral life of the faithful. In this way, the author demonstrates that the effectiveness of a pastoral letter does not follow automatically from its publication, or even from the doctrinal soundness of its content, but also depends on the manner in which it is interpreted, communicated, contextualized, and subsequently incorporated into pastoral practice. This approach makes it possible to understand a pastoral letter not merely as a document, but as part of a broader process of reception and pastoral mediation.

I consider the identification of barriers affecting both the effectiveness of pastoral letters and the assessment of their actual impact to be a particularly valuable result of this chapter. The findings point, among other things, to the importance of the theological formation of clergy, pastoral workload, support from diocesan structures, the availability of catechetical resources, and mechanisms of follow-up and evaluation. The qualitative responses additionally identify such obstacles as literacy barriers, the disruptive influence of partisan politics, and insufficient institutional support. Particularly important is the observation that the frequency with which pastoral letters are disseminated or incorporated into pastoral ministry cannot simply be equated with their lasting influence on the moral behaviour of the faithful; such influence depends on additional structural and formative factors.

Chapter Four therefore constitutes a particularly important stage in the overall argument of the dissertation. It enables the author to move from the question of *what the bishops teach* to the considerably more difficult question of *what happens to this teaching after it has been promulgated*. At the same time, it provides an empirical basis for the practical proposals formulated in Chapter Five. Particularly commendable is the fact that the author does not restrict his analysis to examples of successful reception, but also identifies factors that limit the reception and implementation of pastoral letters and complicate the assessment of their impact. As a result, the chapter offers a more nuanced and realistic picture of how episcopal moral teaching functions in pastoral practice.

Chapter Five, entitled *Enhancing the Effectiveness of Pastoral Messages in Ghana*, constitutes the constructive and practical part of the dissertation. Building primarily on the empirical findings presented in Chapter Four, the author formulates a number of proposals aimed at increasing the effectiveness of episcopal pastoral teaching in Ghana. These include improvements in catechesis and public engagement, clearer and more accessible forms of communication, a broader use of digital media, cooperation between the Church and civil society, and systematic monitoring and evaluation of the reception of pastoral letters. The author also draws attention to emerging challenges related to globalization, digital media, and youth culture, emphasizing the need for pastoral responses that remain sensitive to changing social realities.

I assess this chapter highly, since the proposals presented emerge from the preceding analyses and give the dissertation a clear practical and pastoral dimension. Particularly valuable is the transition from the diagnosis of barriers identified in Chapter Four to concrete proposals for overcoming them. Worth emphasizing is also the author's call for pastoral practice that is increasingly informed by research, feedback, and systematic evaluation rather than based solely on assumptions concerning the reception of episcopal teaching. In this way, Chapter Five provides an appropriate conclusion to the main body of the dissertation and demonstrates the practical relevance of the research. It also reinforces one of the important insights of the whole study: the effectiveness of pastoral letters depends not only on the quality and doctrinal soundness of their content, but also on the manner in which they are communicated, mediated, received, and subsequently implemented in pastoral practice.

The General Conclusion provides a mature and well-structured synthesis of the dissertation as a whole. The author returns to the research questions and brings together the results of the successive stages of the study: from the theological status of pastoral letters and the socio-moral context of Ghana, through the analysis of episcopal teaching, to its reception and the practical possibilities of enhancing its effectiveness. The conclusion therefore goes beyond a mere summary of the individual chapters and integrates their findings around the central problem of the dissertation – the relationship between episcopal teaching, its pastoral mediation, and its actual reception.

Particular appreciation is due to the author's attempt to extrapolate the findings beyond the immediate context of the research. He demonstrates that the experience of the Church in Ghana can provide broader insights into episcopal teaching authority, the mediating role of the clergy in the process of reception, and the effectiveness of ecclesial communication in other

African contexts as well. Moreover, the proposed model, combining catechesis, digital media, community engagement, and mechanisms of evaluation, is presented as a possible point of reference beyond the Ghanaian Church. This is particularly valuable because the author does not stop at the level of a case study of one local Church, but attempts to draw conclusions of broader significance for moral theology and pastoral practice.

I also highly appreciate the author's awareness of the methodological limitations of his research and his identification of directions for further study. He openly acknowledges, among other things, the absence of direct empirical research among lay Catholics, the limited geographical scope of the study, and the inability to measure long-term changes in moral behaviour. He appropriately proposes further research involving the faithful themselves, longitudinal studies, comparisons between dioceses, and comparative research involving other African episcopal conferences. I therefore assess the General Conclusion highly: it successfully summarizes the results of the research, recognizes their limitations, and at the same time opens up perspectives for further study and for the broader application of the insights developed in the dissertation.

The bibliography is extensive and reflects the broad source base of the dissertation. Its internal organization, however, departs somewhat from the standards commonly adopted in theological dissertations and does not always make the different categories of literature sufficiently transparent. In my opinion, a more conventional division into Church documents, primary sources, and secondary literature would make the bibliography clearer and easier to navigate.

3. Content-related and formal assessment

Many of the strengths of the dissertation have already been highlighted in my discussion of the preliminary issues and in my assessment of the individual chapters. Expanding on these observations and considering them as a whole, I would now like to draw attention to several of the most significant merits of the dissertation.

One of the most important strengths of the dissertation is its clearly interdisciplinary character. The author skilfully combines moral-theological reflection with social, cultural, and political analysis, as well as with empirical research into the reception of episcopal teaching. Such a broad approach inevitably entails the risk of methodological eclecticism and a loss of precision in applying methods proper to different disciplines. In the dissertation under review, the author has successfully avoided this danger. The individual methods are appropriately assigned to particular stages of the research and, taken together, form a coherent whole: theological analysis provides the normative point of reference, socio-cultural analysis helps to understand the context of the teaching, while empirical research makes it possible to assess its reception in pastoral practice. Thus, interdisciplinarity is not merely a broadening of the field of inquiry, but becomes a genuine methodological strength of the dissertation, allowing the research problem to be examined from several complementary perspectives.

Another significant strength of the dissertation is its original treatment of reception as an integral part of the moral-theological problem under investigation. The author does not stop at the question of what the bishops teach, but asks what happens to this teaching after it has

been promulgated. Particularly valuable in this respect is the emphasis on the mediating role of the clergy between episcopal teaching and the faithful. The dissertation thus challenges the implicit assumption that the publication of a document automatically entails its effective reception. Instead, pastoral letters are understood as part of a process requiring mediation, accompaniment, and institutional support, rather than merely as authoritative texts. This approach constitutes an important element of the originality of the dissertation.

A further merit of the dissertation is the author's ability to combine the normative dimension of moral theology with the concrete reality of the local Church. Episcopal moral teaching is not analysed in isolation, but is consistently situated within its political, economic, social, cultural, and pastoral context. At the same time, the author avoids reducing moral theology to a merely sociological analysis. Instead, he demonstrates how theological principles can enter into dialogue with lived experience and concrete ethical challenges while retaining their doctrinal integrity. In this respect, the dissertation offers a valuable example of contextually grounded moral-theological reflection, capable of bridging the gap between normative moral principles and the realities of ecclesial and social life.

In the course of this review, I have already pointed out certain weaknesses of the dissertation, particularly the insufficient justification for the selection of the documents analysed and a certain structural inconsistency in Chapter Three. At this point, I would like to draw attention to one further methodological issue, of which the author himself is aware and which he explicitly acknowledges in the General Conclusion.

This issue concerns the distinction between the actual impact of pastoral letters on the faithful and the clergy's assessment of that impact. The empirical research was conducted among priests, who are undoubtedly important observers of the reception of episcopal teaching and play a crucial role in its pastoral mediation. However, the data collected allow us primarily to determine how the clergy perceive and assess the impact of pastoral letters, rather than to measure directly their actual influence on the moral attitudes and behaviour of the faithful. The author himself acknowledges in the conclusion that lay reception was investigated only indirectly, through the experience of the clergy, rather than through independent research involving the faithful themselves.

This distinction, however, is not always consistently maintained in the conclusions drawn throughout the dissertation. At certain points, clergy assessments become the basis for statements about the actual impact of episcopal teaching on parishioners, whereas the empirical material would justify speaking rather of *perceived impact*. This reservation does not undermine the value of the empirical research, which constitutes one of the major strengths and original contributions of the dissertation, but it does indicate the need for greater caution in defining the limits of the conclusions that can be drawn from the data. At the same time, it naturally opens up a perspective for further research conducted directly among lay Catholics, which the author himself rightly proposes.

4. Questions for debate

I would like to pose two questions for discussion.

The author mentions that Ghanaian Catholics live in a religiously pluralistic context and that the clergy need to engage in dialogue with other religious worldviews without undermining interfaith relations. In this context, I would like to ask whether there is a real possibility for the Catholic Church in Ghana to cooperate with other Christian communities and other religions, particularly Islam and African traditional religions, in promoting shared moral standards in society. Are there already initiatives or a willingness to cooperate on the part of these religious communities? How does the author assess the prospects and possible limits of such cooperation?

Catholic moral theology speaks of universal moral norms, but these norms are always communicated and lived within a particular culture. How far, in the author's opinion, can the Church's moral teaching be adapted to a local culture without leading to the relativization of moral norms? Can the experience of the Church in Africa contribute something new to Catholic moral theology in this respect – for example, by offering a different perspective on polygamy and the moral and pastoral challenges associated with it?

5. Final conclusion

Summing up, I would like to stress that the dissertation under review constitutes a successful and academically valuable study of the moral teaching contained in the pastoral letters of the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference, with particular attention to its reception and implementation in pastoral practice. One of its particular strengths is the combination of moral-theological reflection with socio-cultural analysis and empirical research, which enables the author to move beyond the analysis of episcopal documents themselves and to investigate the process through which their teaching is communicated, mediated, and received. In this respect, the dissertation makes an original contribution to moral theology and pastoral studies and may also provide a valuable point of reference for further research on episcopal teaching and its reception in other African contexts.

From the formal and methodological point of view, the dissertation is well structured, coherent, and based on an extensive body of sources and secondary literature. The author demonstrates the ability to conduct interdisciplinary research, draw well-founded conclusions from the material analysed, and recognize the limitations of his own research. The dissertation successfully combines academic value with clear practical and pastoral relevance.

I am convinced that the dissertation under review meets the requirements for a doctoral dissertation and can serve as the basis for the further stages of the procedure for the conferment of a doctoral degree. I therefore propose that the author be admitted to the further stages of the procedure for the conferment of a doctoral degree.

Rev. Damian Wąsek, PhD hab., prof. UPJPII