



Testimony as Political Argument

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Abstract

On the one hand, when compared with the ‘original meaning’ of politics in the Classical or Christian thought, contemporary liberal democracies in general understand politics in a reduced sense. On the other hand, however, democratic debates constantly allow for opening new horizons of interpreting politics. One way to radically renew politics is accepting authentic testimonies as political arguments. To illustrate this point, I offer the reflective analysis of a concrete case concerning the hotly debated topic of migrants in Europe: a Benedictine monastery receives and hosts illegal migrants in Hungary. This example deserves our interest for – when not tendentiously misinterpreted – it can neither be classified as an argument of the conservative approach to migrants nor does it support the liberal reading of the events. It implies, at the same time, a positive and a negative critique to both approaches by simply going beyond the usual political categories.

In order to see how testimony works as a political argument I undertake three steps: 1) Instead of defining testimony, I show through a phenomenological analysis three characteristics of the given example that are both, essential and relevant for political discourse: a) the essentially indeterminate meaning of testimony; b) self-exposure and self-sacrifice; c) the particular political message of authentic testimony.

In the next step, I offer a brief analysis of contemporary political discourse to highlight those aspects concerning which authentic testimonies may transform the meaning of politics: a) mediatization; b) lack of authenticity and credibility; c) technical scientific language; d) impersonal approach to political issues.

As a third step, I unite these two analysis by asking what counts as a political argument in general and whether and how testimonies can function as political arguments.

In my conclusion, I distinguish two types of politics according to their attitude towards testimony: one that is open to authentic testimonies and one that rejects them. By showing some fatal consequences of the latter option I argue for recovering some of politics’ original meaning.

Key words: testimony, politics, religion, value, immigrants

One of the most relevant political issues in Europe concerns the situation of refugees along and within the frontiers of the EU. There is a complex political, moral and socio-cultural debate not just about what the responsible policy is, but also about how to interpret the very problem caused by massive migration. While some focus on the rights of the refugees, others stress the interest of European citizens. It seems quite a challenge to harmoniously unite the point of view of the ‘others’ with that of ‘us’. Curiously enough, both parties often refer to European and Christian values to support their position; they interpret the situation in terms of hospitality, love of the other, mercy, solidarity, freedom of religion, dignity of woman, etc.

The Hungarian prime minister’s decision indubitably marked a turning point of the debate; Mr. Orbán ordered to raise fences on the green frontier of Hungary establishing official gates where migrants needed to register. Rather than arguing *pro* or *contra*, I will focus simply on a peculiar event that happened afterwards and has been often characterized as a *testimonial act*. I am not so much interested in the specific moral value of this act, as on its role as a political argument.

In the midst of rather turbulent events such as violence along the border and inside the camps, as well as the Primate of Hungary, Card. Péter Erdő claiming that, legally speaking, hosting refugees is tantamount to migrant smuggling, the Benedict monastery of Pannonhalma offered to receive a large group of refugees and migrants.¹ It is a highly symbolic act for the monastery was founded by Saint Stephen, the first Christian King of Hungary who in his famous letter (regarded as the foundation of the country’s constitution) points out to his son, Saint Emeric the importance of integrating and loving foreigners as a method to strengthen the country’s power, safety and peace.

It is important to see that the decision did not only concern the community of monks. The monastery is a complex social reality consisting of a rather famous boarding school with approximately 350 students, a home for the elderly, a library, a restaurant, tourist office, winery

¹ See the news in the Hungarian newspaper Népszabadság: <http://nol.hu/mozaik/a-pannonhalmi-apatsag-is-befogadja-a-menekulteket-1561359> (20.05.2016) According to the Archabbot, a decision not to receive migrants would be contrary to the message of the Gospels. Besides, this also the very history of the monastery exemplified through Saint Vilmos Apoc and Saint Martin of Tours obliges them to do so. The Austrian Primate Christoph Schönborn follows the same example when encouraging people to receive migrants in their home.

and a factory of natural products and mineral water. Refugees and migrants were embraced by this extended community of families and monks, professors, students, workers, etc. They did not only receive shelter and food but also were invited to actively participate in the life of the monastery. Some of the migrants even offered a concert together with the boys of the boarding school.

This example will help us to both, (1) specify what a testimony is and (2) how it works as a political argument. In the third part of this essay, I try to elucidate in general terms the political relevance of testimonies.

1. CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF TESTIMONY

Instead of offering here a complete phenomenological analysis of testimony,² I limit myself to consider only those features that are essential to capture the political relevance of this phenomenon.

1.1. THE ESSENTIALLY INDETERMINATE OF TESTIMONY – THE TESTIFIER’S INTENTION

Is this a testimony at all? – Somebody could ask concerning not just the deeds of the Pannonhalma community, but also concerning each and every testimony. For it is essential to any authentic testimony to leave its own interpretation open.³ One can hardly talk about an authentic

² It is, however, necessary to state that my usage of the term testimony is closer to the meaning in common language than to the usual philosophical interpretation according to which testimony is any information acquired through a second person. (See the definition and analysis for example by Andreas Sofroniou, in his work *Politics and Philosophy*, p.55). Receiving traffic directions in this broad sense would also be a testimony. I use the word in a more narrow sense, for I only would call a testimony that which involves an essential reference to some transcendent value. Such testimonies are often called moral testimonies. I would resist applying this term here because it suggests that morality is a separate field of the life-world. Testimonies – as I would like to argue – precisely demonstrate the unity of different values. Moral testimonies are not the only kind; one could equally talk about aesthetic, religious or political testimonies. Yet, it is more pertinent to talk about testimonies that are as such at the same time morally, politically, aesthetically relevant, precisely because they not just refer to but also embody a whole set of values in their very unity.

³ What makes a testimony authentic? – I tried to answer this question by looking for the essential characteristics of testimony concerning Edith Stein and Jan Patočka: Szalay, M. (2017) *Politics and Testimony*, Pensamiento, forthcoming.

The question of the authenticity of a testimony is a very complex issue. It is widely acknowledged that there are two main aspects highlighted by Reid (Reid, T. (1983). *Inquiry and Essays*, R. Beanblossom and K. Lehrer (eds.), Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company) and Hume (Hume, D. (1977 [1748]), *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Eric Steinberg (ed.), Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company). The disagreement is very well summarized by one of the most important experts, Jennifer Lackey in an interview by Richard Marshall: “One of the central questions in the [epistemology of testimony](#) is how, exactly, hearers acquire justified beliefs from the testimony of speakers. Answers to this question have traditionally fallen into one of two camps: non-reductionism or reductionism. According to non-reductionists—whose historical roots are typically traced to the work of Thomas Reid—testimony is a basic source of justification, on an epistemic par with sense perception, memory, inference, and the like. Given this, non-reductionists maintain that, so as long as there are no relevant undefeated defeaters, hearers can be justified in accepting what they are told merely on the basis of the testimony of speakers.

testimony that boasts to be as such, for this would diminish testimony to an act of personal exemplification of a thesis, i.e. to a mere rhetorical figure. Although testimony has a special rhetorical value, it is certainly not about persuasion. The one who gives testimony does not only renounce to promote categories to interpret his own action: he radically exposes himself and his act to the judgment of others. His primary intention is not persuading the audience of the moral or spiritual validity of his or her action or even of the value or truth in question that it pretends to affirm. What can rightly be recognized as authentic testimony has the primary intention of a simple affirmation of a truth or value that is questioned or doubted.

The fact that the testimony is essentially indeterminate and that this is recognized by the subject is certainly co-responsible for the relative fragility of testimonies in terms of persuasive power. A testimony is only convincing for those who are touched by the value that it holds up. For them, however, testimony becomes more convincing than any other argument due to the fact that the content of testimony does not appear as matter of mere intellectual reasoning, but rather as incarnated truth, and thus in some ways unquestionable truth.

In contrast to non-reductionism, reductionists—whose historical roots are historically traced to the work of David Hume—maintain that, in addition to the absence of undefeated defeaters, hearers must also possess non-testimonially based positive reasons in order to be justified in accepting the testimony of speakers. These reasons are typically the result of induction: for instance, hearers observe a general conformity between reports and the corresponding facts and, with the assistance of memory and reason, they inductively infer that certain speakers, contexts, or types of reports are reliable sources of information. In this way, the justification of testimony is reduced to the justification for sense perception, memory, and inductive inference.

There are two different versions of reductionism. According to global reductionism, the justification of testimony as a source of belief reduces to the justification of sense perception, memory, and inductive inference. Thus, in order to be justified in accepting the testimony of speakers, hearers must possess non-testimonially based positive reasons for believing that testimony is generally reliable. According to local reductionism, which is the more widely accepted of the two versions, the justification of each instance of testimony reduces to the justification of instances of sense perception, memory, and inductive inference. So, in order to be justified in accepting the testimony of speakers, hearers must have non-testimonially based positive reasons for accepting the particular report in question.” (See: Marshall, R. (2013), *On Testimony* Interview with Jennifer Lackey, Retrieved from: <http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/on-testimony/> (10.05.2016)) The important point here is that the sources of authenticity, in the sense of why some testimony appears to be reliable, are the person and the message itself. Authenticity epistemologically speaking is a combination of these two aspects: in order to be recognized as authentic, testimonies should come from a person that appears to be reliable and the received message supposed to be true. It is obvious that ontologically speaking the message can be true while the person is anything else than a reliable expert concerning the very topic and vice versa, the testimony can be false because also the reliable expert can be wrong sometimes. What we usually call authenticity is a combination of both epistemological and ontological aspects.

But even if these two requirements are simultaneously fulfilled, i.e. there is a true message coming from a reliable person there is still another relevant meaning of authenticity that is not thematized. Whenever somebody transmits a message, he or she also implicitly informs us about his or her attitude towards the very content of the message. It is his attitude that is most informative about the value embodied in the testimony. It is this point that I particularly would like to draw attention to. Religious testimonies – that I regard as par excellence testimonies – are especially relevant in this sense for they illuminate this aspect in any testimony. The typical fundamental attitude here is well resumed as ‘ontological humility’.

On epistemological issues see the excellent article hereto of Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, in: Adler, Jonathan (2015). "Epistemological Problems of Testimony", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/testimony-episprob/>>. (10.05.2016); See also the original theory of Lackey, in: Lackey, J., & Sosa, E. (Eds.). (2006). *The epistemology of testimony*. Clarendon Press.

The political relevance of this characteristic is that testimonies appear in the political discourse as rather unique and somewhat paradoxical arguments⁴: they do not intend to be arguments, yet they are – especially for those who are sensitive enough to perceive them as such – more persuasive than any other rhetorical figure. Even though testimonies are only attainable for a select group that is open towards its intentional object, they experience a very persuasive unity between theory and praxis.

The example of the Benedict monastery clearly shows this point concerning unity – and not just because of its principle *ora et labora*⁵. Receiving the migrants in the monastery meant for some politically active Hungarians nothing but the rejection of the government's policy, the story of monastery lining up with the critique of the political opposition and against the EU leadership. For those however, open to not just the political dimensions of this story, the same actions were rather an example containing a personal invitation to host the other and integrate the foreign; the story not just worked politically, it worked on them personally.

We have every reason to believe that the community of the Benedictine monks was aware of at least some of the political implications of their decision.⁶ Among other and more important purposes, they even might have wanted to perform a symbolic act that could promote a specific policy. Instead, their principal wish was not to support a political movement, a political party or some political idea⁷; they simply followed the tradition of their own Christian faith and that of

⁴ This paradox has been very well described by Michal Givoni in his groundbreaking article 'Witnessing/Testimony concerning the Israeli soldiers testimonies on Gaza war, called Breaking the Silence' report. Those soldiers were clearly not aware of the possible political torments their testimony caused. Givoni finds here an important point: „This first-person account attests to the fact that testimony is an utterance whose message lies less in what is said than in what transpires.” Givoni rightly points out concerning the paradox nature of testimony that it was also grasped by other philosophers when remarks: „For poststructuralist thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard, Shoshana Felman, and Giorgio Agamben and for psychoanalysts such as Dori Laub, testimony represented an impossible and yet a necessary act. Rather than a form of evidence or a source of information, it was a gesture that laid bare the limits of knowledge, representation, and justice by enacting traumatic and ineffable experiences.”, See: Givoni, M. (2011). Witnessing/Testimony, in: Maft'e'akh. Lexical Review of Political Thought, Retrieved from: <http://mafteakh.tau.ac.il/en/issue-2e-winter-2011/witnessingtestimony/>, (10.05.2016)

⁵ As it is well known, the spirit of St. Benedict's Rule is summed up in the motto *ora et labora* ("pray and work"). Contemplation as prayer and work as practical activity are different yet inseparable dimensions of the good life, life in God. The work of monks is not simply a mere necessary physical activity for mental health; it is rather the corporal way of giving oneself lovingly away for the community. Moreover by their work monks collaborate with Christ in transforming the created world in and through love. Their prayer is also not an individual activity that simply alternates with the practical ones; it is the commemoration of the eternal events of the life of Christ. In their prayer, it is the Church that prays for the whole extended community of all of God's children.

⁶ See the interview with the Archabbot of the monastery in: http://hvg.hu/itthon/20155152_bajban_vannak_akik_eddig_pokollal_meg_ke (12.05.2016). It is clear that Father Asztrik Várszegi is very much aware of the political implications of the decision made by the monastery. Moreover, he argues that being well informed in concerning the current political situation is a moral responsibility for it helps to make good decisions.

⁷ It is good to bear in mind that there are several points concerning the specific way of how refugees and migrants were treated that some liberal would find rather restrictive. People were asked to adopt the rather rigorous time-table and the specific way of life within the monastery.

their own monastery: they responded to the poor who knocked on their door as refugee and migrant.

This example shows that being persuasive in order to promote a project of improving the life of the community is not the principal interest of the testifier, even though there is a desire to see the given truth and value being realized. The monastery community, as in general any testifier, did not so much promote the triumph of the truth and values in question in the world; they did not have a political agenda. Moreover, testifying seems precisely to renounce to political programs of *gradual* solutions and of assuring one's own success or the victory of ideas. Instead, testimony implies an unconditional *complete affirmation* of truth and value in question. Testifiers act not 'politically' in this sense, although, at the same time, they recognize more than perhaps anybody the political character of values and truth: they are constitutive for communities⁸.

1.2. SELF-EXPOSURE AND SELF-SACRIFICE

To say that the subject of the testimony might only want to persuade us of the relevance of some value or of the truthfulness of some claim leaves a question open: what is the main intention to carry it out? Rather than having a specific desire to realize a value, the testifier simply finds himself faced with a given value or truth that calls for an adequate response: any testimony is a radically responsive act.

The urge of responding adequately to the value or truth determines the act to the point that the sometimes fatal consequences appear as less significant than the righteousness of the affirmation of the given truth and values. The attitude of the testifier, besides the humility needed to acknowledge a value as such, is well characterized as "here I am and I can't do otherwise". Needless to say that being unable to do otherwise is not due to a lack of freedom; rather on the contrary: being completely free enables to testifier to fully respond to the compelling call of the value.

It is this simple exposing of oneself to the consequences of 'the right thing to do', that implies undergoing suffering and even, in extreme cases, risking one's own life. A good understanding of this attitude in relation to sometimes life-threatening danger can help us to delineate testimonies of two phenomena: value-responses in general and a heroic act for the community.

⁸ Values can be constitutive for communities through and thanks to testimonies that allow for a renewed intimacy with them. (See to this point: Dulong, R. (1998). *Le témoin oculaire* (les conditions sociales de l'attestation personnelle, Recherches d'histoire et de sciences sociales). This intimacy with a reality beyond the current epistemological, aesthetical and spiritual limits of the given community is at the same token an experience in language in a broad sense. Testimonies are poetic forms of communications and thus by renewing language they also renew the identity and the epistemological limits of the community.

Although any authentic affirmation of a value is a testimony of the value's existence and specific nature, certainly not all value-responses are acts of testimonies in the strict sense. What makes testimonies special is the readiness not necessarily to die but rather to a loving self-exposure to anything that might be the consequence of the value-response, and in this sense, to self-sacrifice.⁹ Even though death is the most significant risk here, the general attitude of testimony implies more than accepting one's own death. What a testimonial act requires is a sometimes even more difficult self-transformation of the self when met with a specific truth and value. Part of this complex process of understanding one's own identity in relation to the intentional object, i.e. to what has to be witnessed and affirmed as really existing, leads to self-renunciation. The old self has to die so that the new and transformed self can live fully.

One thing is that the value or truth affirmed for its own sake seems to have a higher dignity than the testifier's well-being or even his own life. Testimonies therefore are not just responses to values or better to say the very origin of all values¹⁰, but they also manage to inform us about the right 'ranking' of the given value or truth. Authentic testimonies in this sense realize something what was called in the Christian tradition as *ordo amoris*.¹¹

⁹ Sacrifice means precisely "sacerfacere", doing the holy. Testimonies require sacrifice in the sense that they require holy and pure acts, manifestations of the noblest good. Since this is against the mediocre moral and oft false spirituality of the world, it might certainly have bad consequences. What a testimony genuinely implies is not suffering *per se*, but the readiness to suffering the consequences of one's righteous act. The suffering itself is rather accidental to affirmation of a truth or value that is not merely theoretically proposed but also existentially realized. In this sense sacrifice goes along essentially with the insight that it is more important to live in a certain way, i.e. righteously up to the point of being ready to suffer for others than to simply promote some set of values – or it is better to say whatever one regards as such.

¹⁰ I thematized the difference between testimony understood as value response and as a response in an interpersonal relationship through personal self-donation. See: Szalay, M. (2017) Politics and Testimony, Pensamiento, forthcoming.

¹¹ See this important notion St. Augustin, *De civitate Dei*, XV. book. ch. 22.. See further: St. Augustin, *De doctrina cristiana*, L. I. C. XXVII, 28.: „Ille autem iuste et sancte vivit, qui rerum integer aestimator est; ipse est autem qui ordinatam, habet dilectionem, ne aut diligit quod non est diligendum, aut non diligit quod diligendum est, aut amplius diligit quod minus diligendum est, aut aequae diligit quod vel minus vel amplius diligendum est.”

The notion of *ordo amoris* has been revived by contemporary philosophy. The perhaps most distinguished representants rely on Max Scheler. See: Scheler, M. (1954-97). *Ordo amoris*, in: *Gesammelte Werke*, Bern und München-Bouvier/Bonn: Franke, 1954-1997, 15 vols., vol. X. p. 345-376. It is worth recalling here the two main ideas of Scheler:

„Wer den *ordo amoris* eines Menschen hat, hat den Menschen. Er hat für ihn als moralisches Subjekt das, was die Kristallformel, für den Kristall ist. Er durchschaut den Menschen so weit, wie man einen Menschen durchschauen kann. Er sieht vor sich die hinter aller empirischen Mannigfaltigkeit und Kompliziertheit stets verlaufenden Grundlinien seines *Gemütes*, welches mehr der Kern des Menschen als Geistwesen zu heissen verdient als Erkennen und Wollen. Er besitzt in einem geistigen Schema den Urquell, der alles heimlich speist, was von diesem Menschen ausgeht; ja noch mehr: das Urbestimmende dessen, was dauernd Miene macht, sich um ihn herumzustellen – im Raume seine moralische Umwelt, in der Zeit sein Schicksal, d.h. der Inbegriff des Möglichen zu werden, das ihm passieren und nur ihm passieren kann.” (op. cit. p.48)

„Jede Liebe ist eine noch unvollendete, oft einschlafende oder sich vergaffende, auf ihrem Weg gleichsam rastende Liebe zu Gott. [...] Also ist der *ordo amoris* der Kern der Weltordnung als einer Gottesordnung. In dieser Weltordnung steht der Mensch. Er steht als dienstwürdigster und freier Diener Gottes, und nur als solcher darf er auch Herr der Schöpfung heissen.” (op. cit. p. 356)

Another and even more important fact is that the encounter with the truth or value in question appears as constitutive to one's own self, to the point that not affirming it or not fully acknowledging it would seriously compromise one's own identity. *Heroism* might be part of testimonies, but it is only a necessary element to some testimonies, while the re-orientation of self that leads to self-exposure is indispensable.

There is a political implication hitherto that is once again well illustrated by the example of the Benedict community: they truly practiced self-exposure for they did not shy away from a real encounter with whoever entered their community. By introducing the migrants into their personal and community life, they opened themselves to the possibility of meeting 'the stranger', i.e. somebody who is supposed to be completely different. They let themselves to be affected by the differences: they were open to be transformed by the other. It was the beautiful paradox of their Christian faith that enabled them to engage in such a radical openness and charity towards the other. The absolute other for them is Christ as the divine person, but it is the same Christ who is at the same time the most intimate to them, even more intimate than their own self¹². Analogically, the migrant's strangeness could affect them on the basis of the even higher strangeness they found in their own self¹³: appropriating the one means appropriating the other. In this process of encountering each other in order that the migrants could find their refuge under circumstances they probably never imagined, those who were supposedly at home accepted the opportunity to become foreign to themselves. – There can hardly be a more significant political change, for it meant the transformation and the extension of the community.¹⁴ Political thinking, i.e. reflecting on themselves and their common good, included those who lived under the same roof and were fed around the same table. Even when reflecting on issues of the world outside of the monastery, and especially the way of thinking of others who found themselves at the Hungarian borders and crossing through the country was transformed as well, for suddenly there were concrete faces and stories attached to abstract political problems and issues.

See further: de Moine, I. (2009). El ordo amoris como principio inspirador del pensamiento personalista, *Veritas*, vol. IV, n° 21 p. 267-286; as well as Dietrich von, H. (2005). *El corazón. Un análisis de la afectividad humana y divina*. Madrid: Palabra.

¹² See St. Augustin, *Confessiones*, Liber Tertius, 3.6.11.

¹³ Ricoeur, P. (1995). *Oneself as another*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁴ In the words of Michal Givoni: „This intrinsic logic of testimony – the minimal formal requisites that may be activated by its consumers as much as by its producers but must be set in motion in order for this practice to have any political meaning – becomes fully decipherable when testimony is considered alongside the notion of indifference, which forms its backdrop and *raison-d'être*. Testimony, which is often accompanied by slogans such as “that the world may know”, ascribed the unending task of expanding the political imagination that indifference depletes and retying the social bonds it has undone. It is first and foremost an act of moral weaving, an attempt to (re)establish a human relation where one is denied or presumed to be nonexistent.” in: Givoni, M. (2011). *Witnessing/Testimony*, in: *Maft'e'akh. Lexical Review of Political Thought*, Retrieved from: <http://mafteakh.tau.ac.il/en/issue-2e-winter-2011/witnessingtestimony/>, (10.05.2016).

1.3. BEING A TESTIFIER – BEING A POLITICIAN

Not everybody is capable of making the gesture of self-exposure that implies suffering. Who can then be a testifier? Paradoxically enough, nobody can and anybody could. Giving testimony – as we argued above – is not our choice in the sense that we do not create the situation in which there is a need for testimony: its responsive character is essential. The testifier is somebody who is faced with a value or truth in question, or it is better to say, the testifier is somebody who knows, that beyond the problematic issue he is facing there is a human face and subject to be cared for. It is this recognition of the personal aspect of problems that enables an affirmation of truth and values of a peculiar kind (that includes self-exposure and self-sacrifice): affirming the other person without reducing him or her to the actual meaning as limited to the given context (of the problematic issue). A testifier is somebody who has met XY, who at that time happened to be a refugee, rather than meeting a refugee with the name, origin, ethnic and religious background, etc. Since the care for the other to be demonstrated in the testimony is previous to the concrete encounter with this or that other, the testifier is somebody endowed with a peculiar type of imagination: even without knowing XY, he imagines the concrete uniqueness of the person to be affirmed.

It would not correspond to the facts if we contrasted here the positive account of the testifier to the supposedly negative example of the politician – as we think of the latter in rather cynical terms of contemporary political experiences, darkened with corruption, misuse of power, etc. The political *vocation* of human being shall not be confused with the way the profession of the politician is sometimes or even most time exercised contemporarily.¹⁵ Methodologically speaking, it is better to start with the first phenomenon and then draw some conclusion of the analysis thereof to then proceed to the second one.

Since we are members of different communities– even many at the same time – we have a co-responsible to shape them; our responses to values, our attitudes towards people certainly

¹⁵ There is a strong interrelationship and at the same time and important difference between *vocation* and *profession*. Their relation was blurred when Luther translated vocation into (Berufung) as Beruf (profession). His idea based on 1 Kor 7,20 (Ein jeglicher bleibe in dem Beruf, darin er berufen ist. – as Luther translated it in the King James Version: “Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called.”) Luther argued that it means that there is no priority to religious vocation as compared to serving others and the community with the specific talents one was given. The Second Vatican Council made important clarifications concerning the vocation of the laity. John Paul II stated in his Exhortation *Christifideles laici* (30th of December 1988): “It is no exaggeration to say that the entire existence of the lay faithful has as its purpose to lead a person to a knowledge of the radical newness of the Christian life that comes from Baptism, the sacrament of faith, so that this knowledge can help that person live the responsibilities which arise from that vocation received from God.” According to this idea, anybody who is politician by profession responds to his or her call and has the same mission given to the children of God. It is noteworthy here that the profession of being a politician does not coincide with the general mission of the children of God. It is rather that this profession – as any other – has a participative relation to the general vocation by responding to a special mission, i.e. it is a specific form of how to love God and the others.

have an impact on how the common good is to be manifested and realized in these communities. The German term, 'mitgestalten' is very precisely capturing how all members are working on a 'shape' of the community. Many actions and deeds of this co-forming that are not intended to be political, even acts that are supposed to be very private, have an incalculable effect on the final happiness of the community. We do not regard these acts (often with a clear moral and spiritual content) as political activity, and yet it is politics in the best sense of the word.

The phenomenon of testimony invites us to rethink the apparent necessity of separating the *private* and *public* sphere of political life,¹⁶ for testimonies are precisely transformations of morally and spiritually relevant acts – that are often supposed to be private issues – into important public affairs. Testimonies lift up the artificial veil (of modern political thinking) separating the *individuality* from the *community* and help us see the hidden participative and responsive character of our existence – before being engaged in any explicit political action.

Let us see again how this is illustrated by the Benedictine community. They were not acting politically in the sense of trying to be for or against any party or policy of the government. Yet they acted politically for they introduced the migrants into their own community and into what is probably one of the most precious gift at their care, the young students. Their decision was both private and public as it was a decision concerning faith. It does not need to be praised for it is normal, but it nevertheless becomes interesting given the many fears in Europe that these teachers and monks were not the least bit afraid to welcome in their homes and in their school a large community of mostly Muslim people, while allegedly the European task is to defend Christian values, the "defense" of the Christian tradition proposed by this community was the simple imitation of the gesture of Saint Martin of Tours (the monastery's hill is named after him) who famously gave half of his garment to the poor, which in itself is an imitation of Christ.

¹⁶ Even though it is not the main topic of this essay, I would like to mention that such a profound rethinking of the separation of the private and the public sphere – our very questionable modern heritage – goes along with an even more complex and more profound task for political philosophy today: rethinking the allegedly also necessarily separation between the sacred and the profane. Modernity arguably led us here to several dead ends both culturally, politically and spiritually. It is not just a task for different religious communities, but it is also a proper challenge for pro-laïcité thinkers and politicians to show a way out of the complex paradoxes of post-modern politics. Think for example of the paradox of the democratic commitment of supporting religious freedom – is usually not understood in religious terms as individual freedom, but rather as a public affair – and the claim of the neutrality of state. For, if religion is not reduced to an individual right – and this is unacceptable on the basis of religious freedom – then there is no neutrality of the state, since the state supports one group more than the others: religion becomes politics. It is even worse for the modern state, which was established precisely to be religiously neutral and thereby to guarantee peace among different conflicting religions. How a state that puts itself can above all forms of religion, prevent itself from becoming an object of religious devotion? Not only communism and Nazism are profane state-religions, but also the post-modern liberal democratic and secular state is similar in several aspects to how religion "functions". See this: Cavanaugh, W. T. (2011). *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing; as well as: Cavanaugh, W. T. (2009). *The myth of religious violence: Secular ideology and the roots of modern conflict*. Oxford University Press.

The invisible personal (and if you want private) gestures of welcome on the part of each and every member of this complex community within which they accepted the migrants and from which they opened their hearts to them in different ways, were manifested through 'private' expressions, but had an indubitable 'public' effect: those migrants probably have encountered the first time real European culture – not one showcased on television with its economic wealth and social stability they reported as inspiring them to come to Europe, but the one that is truly responsible for Europe's unique cultural transformation in times of migration of Peoples: the Christian spirit of Benedictine monasteries, places of cult and culture with a 'stability' beyond history.

2. POLITICAL DISCOURSE

In order to see how testimony can become politically relevant and used as an argument we first have to grasp first the main features of current political discourse of Western democratic societies and then the meaning of a 'political argument'.

2.1. THE ACTUAL CURRENT POLITICAL DISCOURSE

However different the political discourse might look like in different Western countries, there are certain common features that could be singled out and that are important in our context.

2.1.1. Mediatization¹⁷

Democratic societies are governed through a representational political system. Rather than immediately established between these two poles (those in the government and the governed citizens) the political discourse is orchestrated almost completely by the media. Today, like never before, it would be more than naïve to think that the media's role is truly 'mediation' and that it would simply transmit and broadcast relevant information that matters for a given community. The power of media lies rather in creating and in silencing events, and thereby shaping the political life; by *virtualizing* politics almost entirely it is they who choose and form both poles of the discourse according to the logic of their own interest.

It is important to see this point for at least two reasons: a) Understanding the artificiality and arbitrariness of the mediatization of politics helps to maintain some distance from the

¹⁷ See on this topic: Mazzoleni, G., & Schulz, W. (1999). "Mediatization" of politics: A challenge for democracy? *Political communication*, 16(3), 247-261.

political discourse in which the testimony will be embedded. b) It also contributes to grasping how some political events that the media does not recognize as such can nevertheless be really political.

Testimonies certainly fall under this latter category — it is rather impossible to capture them through the means (vocabulary, images) of the media for what usually makes a testimony what it is, is clearly invisible and by no means ‘spectacular’. To continue with our example: it is just some students of a Benedictine boarding school playing ethno-rock music together with migrants. The real event, i.e. the silent change of their attitude, the identity of the participants, however well expressed, remains invisible for the cameras and in general for the mind-set of main-stream journalism.

Even granted that reality sometimes is poetic enough to seduce even the language of the mass media, a testimony might be recognized as something ‘interesting’. However, it takes a long way from this first reaction to appreciate a testimony for what it really is. These steps can only be performed by each individual person, for it implies an affirmation of the value that has been held up by the testimony.

2.1.2. Lack of Authenticity and credibility¹⁸

Another feature of political discourse that is important in this context is its openly admitted lack of authenticity. Whatever is labeled to be a political message is considered as a product that has to be sold just as any other product on the market. If we understand by authenticity the truthfulness and honesty of a political discourse, i.e. that it truly describes both the facts and the intentions of the speaker, then a political discourse is never truly transparent: behind what is communicated to the voters there is a hidden agenda serving very different interests. It seems that the political discourse is only the surface, the veil that covers the perhaps dark issues of real politics. Even when one rejects any conspiracy theory – as I do – one cannot notice the need to read between the lines of political communication.

The lack of transparency in political discourse is often responsible not just for disguising certain political affairs, but more generally, also for disguising the very nature of politics itself. Political marketing, i.e. politics reduced to the level of commercial messages, runs the risk of truly understanding politics as nothing more than a product to sell. For those, however, who recognize

¹⁸ If this point needs to be proven at all one might want to compare in any liberal democracy the program of any elected candidate with what really has been realized during the time in office. The abysmal difference cannot be explained away by referring to unfortunate external circumstances. The fact that statistically the adult population for example in Great Britain believes that politicians are significantly less trustworthy than anybody on the street (even a used-car salesman) certainly is an important aspect to be taken into account when characterizing political discourse. See: <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/Veracity%20Index%202014%20topline.pdf> (10.05.2016); see as well: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/sep/27/trust-politicians-all-time-low> (11.05.2016).

authentic testimonies as such politics reveals its real nature: behind the scene of an economically dominated ideological discourse they can envision the divine-human drama and the beautiful complexity of interpersonal relationships in which love, forgiveness and self-sacrifice play the most important role.

2.1.3. Technical-scientific¹⁹

In the current political discourse, philosophy plays as little role as possible. It is deeply significant that at major universities political science is conceived as closer to psychology and communication than to philosophy and theology. There is an obvious technical character of the discourse that comes to the forefront when we analyze the disagreement between the left and right wing parties: there is far fewer differences in metaphysical, anthropological and ethical terms than in concrete solutions offered. The conceptual network they use to approach the political realist is strikingly similar, most of the time their analysis of political issues coincide and there is a common reflection on what is legitimately considered to be a 'problem'. To illustrate this point, it is enough to read the electoral programs of different parties in different Western European democratic societies.

Whatever the solution might look like, it is usually seen in technical terms, in economic restructuration in different ways of handling very complex systems to reach the desired outcome. Parties try to position themselves in order to satisfy better that part of the population whose votes guarantee to access to or permanence in power.

¹⁹ In general, I do not mean how science are present in political discourse (like astrophysics or genetics), but it is noteworthy to see some other natural and human sciences are increasingly important as arguments in political debates. Let me mention here three of them. 1) Both the presidential campaign in the USA and the work of the British Parliament are basically unthinkable without a constant reference of carefully chosen *statistical data*. 2) Undoubtedly, but quite strangely at the same time, political discourse primordially revolves around *economic issues*; most politicians see their own principal role to create positive circumstances for economic growth and thereby to contribute to the welfare of a nation. 3) Reaching this objective seems to legitimate many other questionable political decisions. The third important science to mention here – besides statistics and economics – is *psychology* with special regard to manipulation or as it is called euphemistically: public relation techniques. One of the most decisive political issues in modern liberal democracies is the so called spin doctor how he runs the electoral campaign of the leading parties. Some of these people elaborate strategies to get to power almost independently of the given historical or cultural circumstances and certainly independently of any moral sphere. It is noteworthy that often in one country they work for the political left in another country for the right – one can add with a bit of sarcasm: always on a strong scientific and neutral basis.

In the contemporary post-modern and post-Christian world, i.e. after the reduction of theology as a master discourse to philosophy and metaphysics and later on to politics, we can observe now how political issues are increasingly reduced to economic ones. This leads to a new orchestration of political communication. One important point here is this: while politics has a certain tendency of understanding reality in poetic terms, trying to do justice to the superabundant meaning the escapes our linguistic categories, economics is certainly less poetic when reducing all kinds of complex realities to numerical relations. Politics, therefore, by completely subduing itself to economy is tempted to give up its own essence: being a complex art of dealing with interpersonal (divine-human and human-human) relations. Politics thereby becomes a mere methodology of mass-programming in a code that is less and less human, because it is radically inadequate when applied to complex human relations. The new codification of political communication made up of a quite powerful mixture of moralism and sentimentalism, usually serves to veil the hidden economic agenda. See on this: Molnar, T. (1992). *L'hégémonie libérale. L'Age d'Homme.*, especially ch. 3.

Once again, testimonies offer a very different approach to political reality. Instead of technical language, testimonials are rather poetic and inspire philosophical and theological reflections on the topic. Technicalities, let it be actual solutions to problems or the very power-techniques, are marginalized when the suffering reveals its hidden dimensions. It becomes evident that however necessary they are, technicalities are radically insufficient when faced with unique lives and destinies and destroyed communities. These are the moments when professional politics and its technical discourse has to give the floor to real politics that is less technical and rhetorical but probably more ritual and more poetic.

2.1.4. Impersonal²⁰

A further salient feature of contemporary Western political discourse is its impersonal character. It is impersonal in three senses: a) concerning the speaker, b) the content and c) the addressee.

- a) The politician who is for the greater part responsible for the formation of political discourse is more than ever an image heading a very carefully elaborated product, the political message. The exaggerated interest for his or her personality, his or her (moral) character, and above all, for his or her sex-appeal is nothing but a poor compensation for the constant annihilation of his or her personality due to the systemic coercions. Postmodern politics tried so hard to avoid any trace of personal cult and dictatorship that it came to the verge of getting rid of the politician as such. He was replaced by a technician and the reliable administrative or negotiator with no personality and vision, who is at the same time a public figure: something both easily to commercialize and to control.
- b) The content of current political discourse is impersonal because of the deep aversion towards (theological and) metaphysical issues. Consequently politics refuses to deal with the complete reality of a person rather than just with individual aspects of human existence. The terms in which human existence is thematized in contemporary western politics far too often stems from juridical discourse and use rather the juridical-economical and psychological logic than proper political reasoning. Politically relevant issues are approached for example in terms of “this type of individual at this type of problematic situation falls under this type of measures”, and the way to “sell” this

²⁰ Giorgio Agamben speaks about the depersonalization and the reduction to the bare life. See: Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics). The problem of loss of personal identity in totalitarian systems was famously noted and described concerning its political implications by Hannah Arendt: in: Arendt, H. (1973). *The origins of totalitarianism* (Vol. 244). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. See also: Esposito, Roberto; (1988) *Categorías de lo impolítico*, Buenos Aires: Katz.

solution is through influencing public opinion, for example by increasing the emotional pressure on the target group.

Another typical consequence of this shortcoming of contemporary political discourse appears when operating with the metaphysically silent presupposition according to which the subject matter of political actions are rather individuals, than persons embedded in the complex socio-cultural context. Only some argue explicitly that people have to be neutralized and personhood has to be regarded so that it becomes accessible to politics. In order to establish a just and well-functioning political system – and these criteria are often prioritized – it seems politics should be neutral to all features that are crucially important for our identity.

Testimonies, on the contrary, are *per excellence* personal expressions for they are not only a unique answer to values that are highly important for human nature, but also expression, in which the subject's identity is best captured: testimonies are self-revelations of who this person is in accordance with his or her own personal vocation. While the anthropological reality with which contemporary politics deals is reduced to pure neutrality, testimonies are manifestations of the whole person, of all faculties of the soul expressed in a bodily self-gift; they are acts in which the fragmented existence encounters a new unity.

- c) Testimonies in this sense once again challenge the mainstream political discourse by revealing the real subject of politics, human person as an irreducible unity of body and soul endowed with a unique vocation irreducible to being part of political communities. Testimonies, when illuminating the eschatological dimensions and the purpose of human life, do not only challenge the idea that the political discourse is the most profound and most encompassing context to understand and to interpret human existence, but they also reorient political discourse by giving clear guidelines about how to conceive the destiny of human life of which politics is only a part.

2.1.5. Value-neutrality

The contemporary political discourse in Western democracies set for itself a yet another paradoxical task: value-neutrality.²¹ On the one hand, it cannot opt for any desirable life-style for

²¹ This claim can be traced back to the reflections of the very controversial idea of John Rawls about the Veil of Ignorance that itself is a reinterpretation of a long tradition of understanding political participation in terms of social contract. (Think of the prominent works of Immanuel Kant, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Thomas Jefferson.) See: Rawls, J. (2009). *A theory of justice*. Harvard University Press. Another quite different example of proposing certain value neutrality in the political sphere might be the influential theory of Habermas, See: Habermas, J. (1985). *The theory of communicative action, Volume 2: Lifeworld and*

it allegedly lacked any anthropological, metaphysical and ultimately speaking any theological foundation; on the other hand, it is inevitable to propose certain values on which political agendas have to be oriented. Rather than discussing here the dramatic consequences of this inner contradiction that affects not only the modern democratic political discourse, but also the praxis of concrete policies, I limit myself to point out how this creates a considerable tension to accept testimonies within the political discourse.

Testimonies are expressions of dramatic encounters with a value or a set of values the affirmation of which implies a sacrifice for the subject. The integration of testimonies into the political discourse requires the suspension of the principle of neutrality and to accept real existing values with their appeal to be affirmed and realized. Moreover, since authentic testimonies are, by the same token, existential demonstrations of the *hierarchy of values* in the sense of *ordo amoris*, taken them as politically serious also implies subscribing to this ideal as well.

Welcoming migrants into the monastery of Pannonhalma is an act that indicates not just a hierarchy of values, but also the affirmation of their complex unity. Loving one's neighbor whoever she or he might be is certainly ranked as very high, for it is the principle of action. However, would it not be a lack of the same love if, for example, keeping the well-established order of the monastery would not also be considered important?

In this sense, their testimony as any authentic testimony, demonstrates that the affirmation of a set of values in the sense of *ordo amoris*, i.e. *an objectively existing hierarchy of values* implies at the same time the affirmation of all values as such, for all stem from the same origin. The right value-response means precisely not absolutizing values that are important but that cannot be the leading principle. It would be not only contradictory, but even morally reproachable to insist, for example, on the Christian identity of the monastery as a value that has to be preserved even at the cost of shutting its doors to migrants. This would be as contradictory and morally reproachable as, for example, to insist on the rights of the migrants to enter into the monastery and install themselves as if it were their home. Both policies would impede what is at stake here: the free and loving response to each other within a genuine encounter.

If in any sense politics should be neutral, it is perhaps this: allowing that genuine encounters can take place within and on the margins of community.

system: A critique of functionalist reason.). What lurks in the background of this discussion of political theories is an ontological and ethical issue concerning the separation of facts and values. See: Oppenheim, F. E. (1973). "Facts" and "Values" in Politics: Are They Separable?. *Political Theory*, 1(1), 54-68. See as well the classical article of G.E. Moore (Moore, G. E., & Baldwin, T. (1993). *Principia ethica*. Cambridge University Press.) and its recent critique by Ruth Anna Putnam (Putnam, R. A. (1998). *Perceiving facts and values*. *Philosophy*, 73(01), 5-19.) and Hilary Putnam (Putnam, H. (2002). *The collapse of the fact/value dichotomy and other essays*. Harvard University Press.)

As a summary of these five characteristics of the contemporary Western political discourse with respect to testimonies we can claim that testimonies, usually coming from the margins of political reality and especially from those domains where moral, spiritual and legal disorder causes at times immense suffering, they offered the possibility to recalibrate the political discourse. In order to do so they need to overcome difficulties inherent to the actual political discourse such as its mediatization and virtualization, its lack of authenticity, its technical-scientific qualities and complex impersonal character, and finally its contradictory aspiration to value-neutrality. Authentic testimonies, when taken seriously, offer a cure to political discourse and thus are a considerable step towards more human policies.

To take political testimonies seriously, they not only have to be recognized as such, but they also have to be regarded as politically relevant within the current discussion: they have to be understood as arguments.

2.2. WHAT COUNTS AS A POLITICAL ARGUMENT?²²

There are formal and material criteria to decide if something is or is not a political argument or not. For it is clear that there is a difference between a bad argument and something that is not an argument at all. The minimal formal criteria is that the given claim must have a valid logical relation to the thesis it pretends to sustain. According to this, all arguments that pretend to logically sustain a politically relevant thesis is a political argument.

Clarifying the material criteria concerning political arguments is a more complex issue, for it partially implies to subscribe to those thesis that are considered politically relevant.

If in postmodern times the validity of scientific theory depends only on whatever the scientific community accepts as a good scientific explanation, it seems to be reasonable to claim that in a democratic society the criteria to regard something as a political argument depends on whether at least some of the political formations accept it as argument. This is certainly a significant but problematic aspect when taking into account that the political community is usually very divided and that it includes fundamentalist groups as well. It is risky to accept that something can rightly be considered as a political argument just because some fundamentalist group regards it as such.

Now, for any given political community, there are always issues that lie at the center of interest while others are marginal to the point that they are completely neglected. Obviously, this negligence can be justified as well as it can be morally and spiritually completely illegitimate and

²² Govier, T. (1993). When logic meets politics: Testimony, distrust, and rhetorical disadvantage. *Informal Logic*, 15(2).

reproachable. This point is important for, as argued above, the political discourse in contemporary democratic societies has a tendency to reduce the very political sphere in a disturbing manner, for example by tacitly declaring that nothing is beyond politics since everything is political. Whatever counts as a political argument, it does it not only at the mercy of the current members of the political discourse (with their specific spiritual, moral and intellectual limitations), but it also depends on the inherent limitations of a specific political discourse at a given historical time.

Having this in mind, it seems that whatever the criteria might be for regarding something as a political argument within the current political discourse, the best political arguments by far are certainly those that elevate the horizon of the discourse, demonstrating for example that something that was not politically relevant, is very much so.²³ Political arguments are above all those claims that change how we think of politics by broadening its meaning.

In this sense, testimonies are *par excellence* political arguments, for with their specific poetic language, with their decisive personal character, their being authentic expressions of human sacrifice and self-giving for the sake of others, make precisely the type of claims that are capable of pushing politics beyond its limits. Once accepted as politically relevant arguments – if not distorted and misused - testimonies restore the dignity of politics by reestablishing its original theological, metaphysical, cultural and social relevance.

Let us see how this applies to the example of the Pannonhalma monastery.

Whatever their message may be on a political level, it cannot be fitted into the interpretative schemes of political forces found in contemporary Hungarian or in international discourse. Their actions somehow represent a set of liberal values just as they exemplify some conservative arguments, and yet again they contradict the interpretation of the situation of all political forces on important points - not because they want to do so, but rather because reality is always both more meaningful and more exigent than the political discourse is able to grasp and to do justice. This superabundant meaning is only more or less well captured and responded to by concrete and personal actions like the loving welcome of a host.

Once the act of the community of Pannonhalma monastery finds its laborious ways into political discourse – just like many more testimonies of human suffering and forgiveness have

²³ See on this: Lackey, J. (2008). *Learning from words: Testimony as a source of knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. She argues that whereas according to the traditional view “testimony is a merely transmissive, rather than a generative, epistemic source, where this means that testimony can only transmit epistemic properties from one person to another and is thus incapable of generating new epistemic properties in its own right”, indeed this is possible. She points out that „there are scenarios revealing that unreliable knowers may nonetheless be reliable testifiers and, accordingly, that the testimony of speakers who do not possess knowledge of a given fact can nonetheless be the source of knowledge that hearers acquire of this very fact.” (See: Marshall, R. (2013), On Testimony Interview with Jennifer Lackey, Retrieved from: <http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/on-testimony/> (10.05.2016)

found their way into the debate – significant political action can begin. Our conclusion is not surprising: what truly makes politics is the acceptance of the migrants beyond the grasp of political categories.

3. POLITICS OPEN TO TESTIMONY VERSUS POLITICS OVERRULING TESTIMONY

We have made three important preparatory steps by clarifying what politically relevant testimonies might look like. We have introduced five relevant aspects and later we have characterized the current political discourse from different points of view which have allowed us to briefly outline the criteria of what a political argument is. These steps were necessary in order to see what is at stake when testimonies enter into political discourse.

Doubtlessly those who are conforming (*mitgestalten*) this discourse have a special responsibility that, however complex their task might concretely look like, comes down to a simple alternative: whether to listen to testimonies or not.

For there are two radically opposed styles of making politics in this respect: a type of politics that is open and listens to testimonies on the one hand, and another that is closed and cannot listen, but its own voice on the other hand. The latter is an understanding of politics that considers itself as the master discourse and that claims that every other discourse is subordinated to it. No doubt the main stream political machinery today is very much capable to ignore the weak and special voice of testimonies, and if it does listen, cannot hear anything but what suits its own purposes.

Given that the politically most relevant testimonies report arguably from the margins of political life²⁴ about things that are often outside the focus of the actual discourse and that they are very often the only expression of the immense suffering of those who have no language and no voice, not to admit testimonies into the political discourse not only leads to politics becoming abstract and out of touch with life, but also to inhuman discourse and policies.

²⁴ Yúdice, G. (1996). Testimonio and Postmodernism. In: Georg M. Gugelberger. (1996). *The real thing: Testimonial discourse and Latin America*. Duke University Press.

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