
Studies were a divine gift that changed my life



Luboš Palata is interviewed by Marie Opatrná

Luboš Palata is a Czech journalist specializing in European and Central European events and Czech foreign policy. He has received several rewards, including the Ferdinand Peroutka Prize. He graduated in political science from Charles University and in applied ethics from Catholic Theological Faculty of Charles University.

You are a very successful journalist who surely has a lot of work. What made you study at Catholic Theological Faculty? Why did you choose applied ethics?

Talking about theological faculty, I have to say that I didn't choose it. At that time, I would have said it was a coincidence. However, after two years at Catholic Theological Faculty I see a divine intervention in it. You just go on a trip to Sázava and get an idea that you haven't been in Sázava monastery for a long time. So, you go there and have a nice chat about St Procopius. And on your way out you'll notice a Catholic Theological Faculty leaflet where you read about combined studies. And you'll get an idea that you could try it. But then you find out that standard entrance examination has already been. But God's voice will tell you to try to call there if there is not a chance. And there is one because the second round of entrance examination is in September. Lessons are on Saturdays, which was my only free day in the week. And it is possible to follow up my bachelor degree from the 1990s when due to working full time in Mladá Fronta I was not able to continue standard master studies any more. So, it looks good from this point of view as well.

You will read the recommended books but still you do not know at all what you are going to. You'll take the entrance examination with a huge respect, as if you are visiting a totally unfamiliar country or another planet. I have to say that I wasn't a believer, only my wife was. I only gave her a lift to church sometimes and waited for her.

During the entrance examination, you will get a text in English which you have to translate. The text is about the difference between gender and sex, about the issue of transsexuals and transgender people and so on. And you are tested by a nun...

Was it a surprise for you?

A surprise... Well, I said to myself that it wouldn't be a completely different planet, there might be oxygen there to breathe and it might be possible to live and study there. After a very pleasant entrance examination, for which I had read books I liked, I stepped in this river as a person without any experience, both with Christianity and this whole environment.

The two years at the faculty saved my life. It was the peak of the migration crisis and many colleagues of mine from the newspaper had turned radical before my eyes. I don't think I am any "do-gooder", but I am a person who tries to think humanely, admires T. G. Masaryk and tries to see every refugee as a person, not as a number. Suddenly in the newspaper I was in the environment where I did not belong, and I felt kind of isolated there. But it was hard to find another journalist job and it took more than two years. I felt like a black sheep there. It was a really hard time.



I attended the lessons at the faculty every Saturday as a sort of a spiritual retreat. Because an overwhelming majority of my schoolmates together with Christian thinking I had been discovering and a Christian attitude to the world gave me power to survive the other six days of the week. And one more thing which I love and for which I like doing journalism. It is the fact that you simply learn new things. When the people around me ask me about my studies, I always say that I do not regret a single Saturday I spent at Catholic Theological Faculty.

I did not feel that I had learnt something useless there and that it was wasted time. I really looked forward to the lessons, the school gave me a lot. Suddenly I was able to look at the same things from another point of view, sometimes even a totally opposite one. However, there was a free atmosphere there and an unexpected range of opinions. It was not a catholic dogmatism but a surprisingly free discussion. At least for a person who had no idea what can be taught at Catholic Theological Faculty. And I met excellent people there, both teachers and schoolmates. It was really two years of wonderful studies.

You have just answered my next question. I wanted to ask if your studies had influenced you in any way. Did it influence your work as well? When I was preparing for the interview, I realized that I had never been thinking about whether faith influences journalism.



Definitely. Besides my work for the Czech media, I regularly write to the Gazeta Wyborcza Polish daily newspaper. Those who know the Polish situation are aware that the Gazeta Wyborcza definitely isn't a religious daily. And in some attitudes, the newspaper is even in a war with the Polish church hierarchy. I must say that thanks to my studies I suddenly was able to see some issues where I agreed with my Polish colleagues from the other side. It didn't mean throwing away their opinions and automatically accepting the opinions of those criticised by the Gazeta Wyborcza. The studies simply extended by spectrum.

And I must say I started to think more about the things about which you know that they are not always right, but you do not think about it too much. For example, artificial reproduction, beginning of human life and its end. Or whether we keep up pace with the technological development in order to make sure that it would not become a threat rather than a hope. Just yesterday I came across an article about Stephen Hawking. Before his death, he warned about a danger of possible creation of artificial "superhumans". We discussed this topic quite intensively in several different subjects. We discussed where the borderline is and what dangers it brings when it is crossed by somebody. I think that thanks to my studies I am currently able to think about some ethical problems deeper than before. Which is definitely a great bonus for a journalist, at least for such one who tries to be a real journalist.

Your CV says that in 2002 you received the Ferdinand Peroutka Prize which is awarded to people who prove their honesty, high moral integrity, personal responsibility for the social consequences of their journalist activity etc. You must have been thinking about these crucial issues before your studies. Was the prize awarded to you connected with a concrete topic you were working on at that time?

It was an excellent time for me when I worked as a foreign correspondent for several years, I lived in Bratislava and was in charge of the whole Central Europe. The following two years I worked as a deputy editor-in-chief of the Pravda daily newspaper. The prize was connected with my writing about Central Europe, which is a topic I have been writing about for more than 25 years. I have always tried to think about this region as a whole, I compared our joys and sorrows with those of the people living in the neighbouring states. It was an unusual way of writing. Journalists often distorted our situation, mainly political one, or even lied about it. I tried to describe truthfully where we are. A comparison with the surroundings will give you a rational basis thanks to which you can claim something or oppose those who lie about us or our surroundings.



Now, as somebody who has been writing about Central Europe for twenty-five years, I am quite sad. Because what I supported with my writing, i.e. the cooperation of Central European countries - Visegrád, currently shows a completely opposite direction. It is not cooperation of countries trying to become freer and more democratic, to become a part of the best functioning and democratic part of the world granting the biggest rights to their citizens and providing the best life from my point of view. Central Europe currently liquidates or at least restricts democracy. It defines itself senselessly against its partners in Western Europe. It presents itself as being better despite the facts proving the opposite. We can see that small dictators are proliferating here and it reminds us of the period between the world wars, which did not bring anything good to Central Europe. So, it is my way of the joy from the Peroutka Prize to the sorrow over my beloved region which actually earned me the prize.

At the start of the year, you published an article "Dutiful journalism is on the verge of extermination in the whole Central Europe". How do you see the role of journalism in new media but also in the now frequently discussed freedom of speech? Is there a future for traditional journalism?

I hope there is. Also, because it means more for me than just an occupation. It is not a way of making money, it is a way of existence for me. I do not grumble at the electronic media because it is an excellent way how to get close to readers. However, a big problem is that our work is available for free and people have got used to it. The same has been experienced by musicians. But unlike them, we, journalists, cannot organise a festival or give a concert. So, we are in a big trouble to make a living from this work "for free".

But there are still areas where you get paid well for your work. Somewhat worse situation is in some other kinds of journalism, for example dutiful investigation journalism, which is perhaps most costly. We, foreign correspondents, have the second most costly work. We need to travel all over the world, write reports and sometimes stay at a foreign location for several years. Nobody in Czech printed media will pay for that nowadays. But it does not mean that traditional journalism is disappearing completely. I say that doing really dutiful journalism is like custom shoemaking.



It does not mean that we can compete with those who make bonded sneakers. But there are still people who appreciate beautiful handwork, which craft should produce. Journalism is not art, but a dutiful

craft. When it is done well, it requires effort, time and knowledge. There will not be many of those who will do this type of journalism, but they are here and will be here. And it is up to people, if they have the means for that, to buy hand-made shoes rather than bonded sneakers, i.e. the information which is available on the internet almost for free, or for free altogether.

Did your studies also influence your personal life?

The studies gave me one more key moment I haven't mentioned yet. Thanks to it I became a believer, I was christened and I had to get married once again to the same woman, before God. A great impulse for me came from Lent reflections in Nový Dvůr which I spent with the faculty chaplain Dr. Vopřada and a group of students.

When I went there, I was still an atheist. When I had done six monastic prayers and services, I went to our chaplain and asked him: "Monsignor, I am an atheist. I'm afraid I'm ruining it. Could you christen me so that tomorrow everything was all right?" (laughter) He said no. But then a year of preparations for christening followed, including fabulous St. Vitus Cathedral where I was a catechumen. That year I was christened at Easter, had a wedding two weeks later, then I handed in my theses and took final state exams. So, I can really say that the studied changed my life.

I think that the general public should be informed that a person like me, an atheist, can study at Catholic Theological Faculty. Naturally, the students do not have to end up baptized Christians, but they can. And even if I hadn't been christened, I am convinced that the studies of applied ethics can be really enriching for a person from outside. As it opens up this new world for them, a new universe. A world where, if you want, you can meet the God. Therefore, I believe that Catholic Theological Faculty is a miraculous place.

The text was first published in DOXA vol. 5, no. 1, December 2018 , pp. 17-19.