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**“A Strong Woman“ in the Lenten Letter
of Bishop Mileta as Support
for the Society in the Sibenik During
Communist Yugoslavia**

Using the opportunity of every Lent, Bishop Jerome Mileta of Sibenik used to send a Lenten pastoral letter to all his priests and believers. One of such letters – from 1931 – is titled “On Christian Strength”. In his letters, he often uses biblical texts from the Old and New Testament. Even though he is not an exegete, he handles biblical terms excellently: applying events and concepts of biblical passages to the daily life of believers. The historical context outlines the communist regime spreading in the former Yugoslavia. Each of the bishop’s letters is actually an encouragement to continue following the path of faith – and this path is realized in the light of biblical messages.

In the Lenten letter titled “On Christian Strength”, Mileta warns about the state of modern man who stopped living the life of the Church. And – what is arguably even worse – he no longer identifies with the Church. Mileta sees

Lent as an opportunity for spiritual improvement of his believers. The bishop of Sibenik finds the lack of Christian strength as the cause of this spiritual condition 1900 years after the resurrection of Jesus. He compares the barren state of modern man to the lack of roots from Luke’s parable of the grain (Lk 8:13). He reminds his believers that Christians are called to strength by the power of the cross and encourages them with passages from New Testament about remaining strong: Mt 11:12; 1 Cor 16:13; 1 Pt 5:8-9. The loss of Christian strength leads to the greatest evil – such as suicides. Mileta compares the situation of the modern man to the walk of the Chosen People through the desert or to the situation of Job. In those two cases, the Hebrews’ faith in the Only God, the Savior was tested, he argued and looked for the cure for the suicidal plague. He believed in his people – carrying the Christian strength deep inside them.

For Mileta, the symbol of Christian strength is the “strong woman” from the book of Proverbs 31:10. She becomes the embodiment of all women – especially mothers who pass their faith on to their children.

Keywords: Bishop Jerome of Mileta, Lent, suicide, Bible, Excellent (Strong) woman

Introduction

Bishop Jerome Mileta of Sibenik writes in a certain context of his time more than a hundred years ago. He closes his great concern for the spiritual and physical well-being of his believers in the Lenten letters. Is there a biblical basis for them and how can they be understood today? The bishop of Mileta found a cure in the Bible. Maybe it will be useful in our times as well?

Although communism is not so strong in Croatia, the answer to these questions is still important in today’s society, which in this paper we will observe as the community of the baptized, which means the Church. Apart from world ideologies, today we encounter other “diseases” of our age. One of them is suicide. Unfortunately, the revealing data do not represent the numbers of suicidal cases in proportion to baptized or non-baptized persons.

Mileta and the “Lenten Letter”

Bishop Jerome Mileta (Šibenik, April 17, 1871 – Šibenik, November 23, 1947) is known especially in the circles of the dioceses of Šibenik and Zadar. He was a member of the Franciscan Conventuals. Studied theological sciences at the Roman University De Propaganda Fide, where he received his doctorate in 1893. He served as librarian of the Antonianum in Padua and vice-rector of the Seraphicum in Rome. He was ordained a bishop in 1922 (Jeronim Mileta, 2021).

Like a caring father, Bishop Mileta took care of the flock entrusted to him in the Sibenik and part of the Zadar archdiocese. He often addressed the Christian crowd. One of the ways of communicating with believers at the beginning of the twentieth century was “Lenten pastoral letters”. In them, he touched on current issues in the nation that were connected to the moral and political crisis of the time. Mileta would always point out the problem, but looking for solutions in the Bible, he would offer a cure against the “modern diseases” of his time or pastoral instructions related to dioceses or parishes.

Jerome Mileta wrote several Lenten letters. Seven letters were available to us: From 1922, “The first pastoral letter”; “The pastoral letter” since 1923; “The pastoral letter” since 1924; since 1925 “Shepherd’s paper about the jubilee or Holy Year of 1925”; from 1934 “On Christian Strength”; “Life in the parish” from 1938; since 1940 “The need for moral renewal”.

Lent is a special time of renewal that has accompanied catechumens in preparation for baptism since the beginning of Christianity. During the time of Cyril of Jerusalem (at the end of the 4th century), Lent became a period of time that lasted forty days before Easter, modeled after

Jesus’ fast in the desert that preceded his public activity (Suggit, 2004). However, Lent in 1934 was special for the Šibenik bishop and apostolic administrator. Not only for him personally, but also for the entire Church “Lent year In 1934, he would say – it has an even deeper meaning and its influence can be more beneficial to souls if one thinks that it is the last period of the 1900th anniversary of the redemptive death of Christ and that with it the Holy Year ends!” (Melita, 1934, p.1).

As Mileta (1934, p. 1) himself observes: “From the first days of Christianity, the Church has marked the season of Lent to its believers as a suitable time for the renewal of the inner man and the formation of the strength of the soul”.

The bishop of Sibenik writes with great regret about the situation that is happening among the faithful: “Although the celebration of the Holy Year has borne fruit, unfortunately many Christians do not persist in their decisions. The first difficulty overcomes them and knocks down their most sacred dreams, the first opposition weakens their rapture, the first temptation leads them to a spiritual fall again!” (Melita, 1934, p.1).

What to do then? Mileta sees the solution in God’s word. Therefore, my personal interest in studying the Lenten letter from 1934 “On Christian Strength” is to highlight the biblical places pointed to by the Bishop Mileta.

The title itself is based on a biblical line from Proverbs 31:10. It should be admitted that the bishop of Sibenik did not emphasize the biblical symbols in the title, nor did he directly quote the Bible. Why? I believe that the answer will come on its own after analyzing the text of the Scriptures and the biblical verses in the next chapter. Now let’s look at the structure of the bishop’s Lenten letter.

Structure

The letter begins with an introduction in which the author talks about the goal of addressing the public. He also points out the problems in the Church at that time.

The Lenten epistle is on seventeen pages. It is structured as follows:

An introduction containing the purpose of the letter. This is followed by nine parts in which Mileta seeks an answer to the bad situation among the faithful. The answer comes from God's word, that is, eleven quotations of biblical lines from the Old and New Testaments. The key chapter in which Jerome of Mileta applies the medicine is the sixth chapter, which extends to the rest explaining the character of the line.

In his letter, Mileta did not highlight a particular conclusion. Every chapter after the sixth seems to be built in the form of a conclusion.

The key biblical place on which the bishop bases his epistle is the line from Proverbs 31:10 "Who will find a good wife? She is worth more than pearls." Mileta reformulated that title and shortened it to only the first part "on Christian strength". It must be admitted that at first glance there is a difference between the two formulations. However, as further analysis will show, these two formulations are the same.

Of course, looking at the Church as one of the socialized groups that fits into today's sociological mosaic, it is worth applying the method that Mileta used despite the problems of today. Although communism no longer rules today, at least in a visible way, suicides and a lack of identity plague today's world (HZJZ, 2021)¹.

¹ Cf. "Over the years, there have been fluctuations in the number of committed suicides, as well as in the number of committed suicides according to the number of inhabitants (rate/100,000). Since 1999, there has been a downward trend in suicides. In 1985, 1,050 suicides were committed (rate 21.5/100,000). An equal and at the same time the highest number of suicides was registered in 1987 and 1992 (1153 cases, rate 24.1/100,000 and 1156 cases, rate 24.2/100,000). The fewest committed suicides were registered in 1995

It is an interesting fact that the highest percentage of suicides is among the male population.²

Issues

Although the dedication of the Lenten letter emphasizes the 1900th anniversary of the Redemptive Death of Christ and that it completes the Holy Year, Mileta no longer refers to this information during his address to the people. It is possible to understand that the word in everything he writes is a consequence of the salvation passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, the Šibenik shepherd sees the reasons for evil among his believers. In order to talk about it, he uses a biblical text, thereby highlighting the existing problem in society. Mileta answers why many Christians fall away from the faith on the basis of Lk 8:13 “And these have no root, who believe for a while, and in the hour of attack depart”.³ The first reason that Miletus notices is very little connection with God’s word. Although he does not use the exact quotation from the Gospel of Luke, we can read his intention from the context of the eighth chapter of the Gospel of Luke in which Jesus tells the parable of the grain and the soil. He explains to the disciples privately that it is about God’s word and about a heart that is ready to bear fruit (cf. Lk 8:9 +).

(930 cases, rate 19.4) and in the period 2000–2020. (926 cases, rate 20.9 in 2000; 556 cases, rate 13.7/100,000 in 2020). With regard to gender, the ratio of male to female suicides ranged from 2.2 to 3.85:1”.

² HZJZ 2021. From 1991, from the beginning of the war in the former Yugoslavia until 2019, 3,269 veterans raised their hands. Because of this data, it is said in Croatia: “The suicides of veterans are no longer news, but a social scourge” (Rašović, 2019).

³ <https://bibli.ks.hr/evangelje-po-luki/8> [accessed: 5.11.2021]. LK 8:13 We bring a contemporary translation: “And on the stone – these are those who when they hear, with joy they receive a word, but they do not have the roots: you believe for a while, and at the time of the temptation they waste. We see the difference in translation. Specifically, we assume that Mileta used exclusively by translation of vulgate and biblical texts, he translated his own need.

Immediately after the indicated problem, the Šibenik shepherd concludes: “One wonders what is the cause of this?” The answer is easy. They lack Christian strength!” (Mileta, 1934, p. 2). Mileta’s points to the lack of moral strength of the new generation, which is called modern, soft-spoken, mentally weak, frivolous, which runs after the material and avoids the spiritual. The Bishop of Sibenik is pained that generations of strong people are disappearing because Christians reject the cross of Jesus (Mileta, 1934).

According to the Šibenik shepherd, a Christian without strength surrenders to the lowest passions. The inclination to evil persuades him. Anger spurs him on. Greed encourages him to grab other people’s. Laziness and selfishness distract him from sacrifices and effort (Mileta, 1934).

Through the already mentioned human weaknesses, Mileta states the outcome of such a life without God, without the cross of Jesus: “The worst thing is done by those who “cheat” on their lives. The daily chronicle of suicides is painful. Every day, the newspapers bring, with detailed descriptions, several cases of suicide, which were committed by people because they were crushed by misery and tired of life, or because they were broken by an incurable disease” (Mileta, 1934, p. 7). Furthermore, Mileta is looking for a reason. For him, the suicide epidemic resembles the oppressed Israelis in Egypt. They need liberation (cf. Exodus 20:13), as God did with the people of Israel, and on top of that, he made a covenant with them. The Israelis, as well as the Christians, came to know God’s right “Thou shalt not kill.” (Ibid, p. 8) He does not dwell too much on that biblical event, but moves on to the answer that is repeated in several places in the pastoral letter: What do Christians lack? “That the first and biggest reason is that the Christian strength has disappeared in the soul of the unfortunate, which gives strength in the most difficult moment

of life so that a person does not raise a hand on himself, does not destroy his life!” (Ibid, p. 8).

Christian strength – Fortitudo

Mileta’s points to Christian strength as the basis of religious life. Strength as a spiritual differs from physical strength. However, one opposes the other. The world is looking for strength of body more than strength of soul. “The road that leads to God and eternal salvation is steep and hard. For a Christian to achieve the greatest good, he must have a great and manly spirit to remove all that distracts him from good. One of the fundamental or central Christian virtues, which governs the moral life of man, is strength (fortitudo). This makes us brave and that we are not afraid of any danger, not even death itself in the service, in the performance of our duties towards God” (Mileta, 1934, p. 7).

Mileta concludes that everyone needs Christian strength. Along with his claims, he uses biblical passages: “8 Be sober! Watch out! Your adversary, the devil, like a roaring lion goes around looking for someone to devour. 9 Resist him strong⁴ (στερεοί) in faith, knowing that your brothers in the world endure such the same sufferings” (1Pt 5, 8–9). We see a similar situation in Mt 11:12. And from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven is breaking through with strength⁵ (βιάζεται) and the violent are grabbing it.

In both cases, we notice Miletus’ own translation, which always uses the word strength. The same intervention is visible in the sixth chapter of

⁴ The KS Bible translates “stamenst” in this place. And in this place, it seems, Mileta uses her own translation of the text. Which, in fact, corresponds to the whole context of his Lenten letter.

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the Lenten epistle. The Šibenik shepherd does not give in to despair. He sees the strong victory of the people of faith, who by God's grace remain strong. He compares the strength of the people of faith with Proverbs 31:10. Mileta is looking for brave women and mothers who will raise their children in the Christian spirit.

It seems convenient to us to compare the Christian "strong woman" with the entire Christian population. She has the gift of parenthood and the transmission of faith. Mileta calls it the "noble burden of motherhood" (Mileta, 1934, p. 13).

A woman as strong as a medicine against all the diseases of the modern world

A woman also has a threatened place in society. There is much that discourages women: "Free women without bonds, without spirit, without mental strength. Raised in the school of film and dance. Suffering from destructive views about marriage, about family, giving birth and raising children" (Mileta, 1934, p. 11). According to Mileta, such women do not stick to their faith or their strength of soul. I would not like to interpret this line exclusively in terms of women, although it seems so after the first sentences. I suggest extending the line about a "strong woman" from the Proverbs to both spiritual interpretation and men.

First of all, we bring the biblical text known as the Song of the Good Woman (Proverbs 31:10–31). Bishop Mileta of Šibenik, together with the author of the Wise Proverbs, is referring to an excellent strong woman. His entire letter seems inspired by this hymn (New American Bible, 2011):

¹⁰ Who can find a woman of worth?

Far beyond jewels is her value.

¹¹ Her husband trusts her judgment;

he does not lack income.

¹² She brings him profit, not loss,
all the days of her life.

¹³ She seeks out wool and flax
and weaves with skillful hands.

¹⁴ Like a merchant fleet,
she secures her provisions from afar.

¹⁵ She rises while it is still night,
and distributes food to her household,
a portion to her maidservants.

¹⁶ She picks out a field and acquires it;
from her earnings she plants a vineyard.

¹⁷ She girds herself with strength;
she exerts her arms with vigor.

¹⁸ She enjoys the profit from her dealings;
her lamp is never extinguished at night.

¹⁹ She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her fingers ply the spindle.

²⁰ She reaches out her hands to the poor,
and extends her arms to the needy.

²¹ She is not concerned for her household when it snows—
all her charges are doubly clothed.

²² She makes her own coverlets;
fine linen and purple are her clothing.

²³ Her husband is prominent at the city gates
as he sits with the elders of the land.

²⁴ She makes garments and sells them,
and stocks the merchants with belts.

²⁵ She is clothed with strength and dignity,
and laughs at the days to come.

²⁶ She opens her mouth in wisdom;
kindly instruction is on her tongue.

²⁷ She watches over the affairs of her household,
and does not eat the bread of idleness.

²⁸ Her children rise up and call her blessed;
her husband, too, praises her:

²⁹ “Many are the women of proven worth,
but you have excelled them all.”

³⁰ Charm is deceptive and beauty fleeting;
the woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

³¹ Acclaim her for the work of her hands,
and let her deeds praise her at the city gates.

What is most noticeable in this place is the translation of the bishop of Miletus. But before we talk about it, let's look at a short interpretation of a famous song.

This poem belongs to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. It consists of five collections closed by an appendix: (30:10–31), which outlines the portrait of an ideal woman – wife. The author of the Book leaves the reader with the question of whether he has found a practical expression of Wisdom, presented in the previous lines of 30,1 9 (Metzger, Coogan, 2004).

An excellent woman, whoever finds her, is worth more than pearls. In this case pearls are compared to the rarest stones in the world such as ruby. This is how wisdom is compared, that is, a virtuous woman. Such a woman knows how to separate well, according to Deuteronomy 22:11, the two types of materials wool and linen (v. 13). From rr. 16–24 the

author lists occupations for women. Women were mostly interested in agricultural activities and they wove. This is what v. 19 talks about in the expression of the mover and the spindle. All this meant that they knew how to make beautiful clothes for their household and were a source of pride for everyone (v. 22). Because of this, their wives were also respected (v. 23) (Walton, Matthews, Chavalas, 2004).

What exactly did the Bishop of Miletus mean when he mentioned a “strong woman” in his letter? The first thing to talk about is the translation. As it was in the previous chapter, in this one the bishop of Šibenik thoroughly uses the word “strength”, or in this case “a strong woman”. We assume that Miletus had before him the Vulgate text in which we read “(aleph) mulierem fortem quis inveniet procul et de ultimis finibus pretium eius” (Prov. 31:10). All translations refer primarily to “strength” – “fortitudo”. There are other possibilities of this translation, but in this case “strength” is the most appropriate.

If we go back to the original text that was written in Hebrew, we will be able to better discover its meaning in the author’s own imagination, which can be lost in translations or the broader meaning of the term is lost due to the spirit of the language into which it is being translated. Thus, in the Hebrew original, the word הַיִל (hăyil) is used, which means strength, that is, strength. Using the formation “woman of strength”, common in the Hebrew language, which is used to describe the term itself, in this case it means a strong woman. When the same construction is used with the term man (אִישׁ – ’iš) in 17 out of 23 occurrences, the reference is to a warrior. Apart from the frequent occurrences of the plural, an individual warrior can be called a strong or powerful man. Here too, however, there are noteworthy passages without military overtones. The priest’s son Jonathan is a “worthy man” (1 Kings 1:42). So also in the hymn of praise to the fathers in Sir 44:6, the context suggests people who are peaceful, rich

and respected, but hardly soldiers. Above all, a more general and peaceful sense of the term $\etaַיִל$ (*hăyil*) must be assumed when used with the term woman. We find the same construction in the book about Ruth 3:11, which describes Ruth in her independence, courage, strength, but in a special way of values. In Proverbs 12:4; 31:29, also, it indicates the general ability of the housewife, if not so much has been said about her efficiency and ability (Eising, 1980).

If we look at the broader concept of strength and power in biblical speech, we will see that it does not always and completely denote pure human strength, either male or female. It also develops in the psychological area in such a way that the power of faith is visible precisely in the awareness of one's neighbor (Romans 4:20; 1 John 2:14) and determination. Strength is also courage, trust, knowledge and a convincing proclamation of one's own faith. (Ryken, Wilhoit, Tremper, 1998).

It is certain that due to the wide range of meanings of Hebrew words as well as the female nature, which is much gentler than the opposite sex, throughout history the meaning of "strong woman" was much more similar to that of "virtuous woman"⁶. This meant more the strength of a woman in performing her daily tasks, which are full of patience, tenderness and creativity. Unfortunately, for these reasons, one of the dimensions of the meaning of a particular term can be lost in translations, in our case, the dimension of strength and power that a woman possesses. Therefore, we can freely say that the translation of the Bishop of Miletus, in which he chooses instead of "excellent woman" precisely "strong woman", has its weight and foundation in the original Hebrew text.

Also, the Greek translation (LXX) uses the adjective $\alpha\upsilon\delta\rho\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma$ which primarily denotes manliness, since it comes from the same term, but also denotes courage and especially strength. This very first translation of the

⁶ For that reason, American translation is "worth" women.

biblical text, which according to tradition was made in the 3rd century BC. Kr. in Alexandria, shows how Miletus' translation follows the logic of the first translators of the original text.

Since this is a literary genre that we call a hymn, which if used in this way usually celebrates a military victory (Judges 5), in our case it celebrates a woman, and in a special way her qualities. Special mention should be made of intelligence, practical abilities and love. Verse 25 also comes to the fore, which says that this woman is clothed with strength and dignity. Exactly such an expression wants to indicate a quality that fills the whole person, a quality that is fully present. The same construction is used for God (Ps 104:1) when it is said that he is clothed with splendor and majesty. Therefore, we can say that the content of the anthem follows the vision of a “strong woman”. In a woman, therefore, strength unites all her other qualities.

Therefore, if we replace the most familiar translation as “excellent (worth) woman” with “strong woman”, we get a very strong spiritual message of the Bishop of Sibenik, which is interwoven throughout his Lenten letter. On top of that, Mileta (1934) mentions the action of the Holy Spirit in the text of the Holy Scriptures, which adorns a woman with the title “strong”. Of course, it is about the spiritual dimension of that word. Since that message is based on wisdom literature, strength will also be associated with wisdom. This means by belonging to God, by studying his word. In addition, we recognize in this literary intervention the connection of strength with the Gift of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, “strong woman”, which does not necessarily mean a woman, but also every believer, is gifted with the power of strength. Our thinking about the fact that it is not only about women in this passage of the Lenten letter goes back to the very beginning when the shepherd from Šibenik addresses all believers and asks for a cure for their spiritual illnesses.

The concept of “strong women” seems to be truly a cure for all the spiritual diseases that the bishop spoke about at the beginning. However, we must not forget the role of women in the bishop’s epistle. Mileta looks for exemplary women who have been raised by the Church since its very beginnings, and puts their chastity and piety in contrast to the modern age (Mileta, 1934). Mileta (1934) considers the lack of strength among believers to be the lack of faith and mixed marriages.

Furthermore, the bishop of Šibenik invites men to cooperate with the Christian strength they have received. Strength comes from suffering, but also from sacrifice, which Miletus observed among those who should be significantly strong Christians. “Our age is looking for strong Christians!” Mileta concludes her letter, and in the courage of “strong women” she sees a cure against the disintegration of the Church.

Furthermore, it is evident that the role of women in society is great. From the beginning of biblical times, the man was appointed as the one who rules the world with his companion who takes the form of “help” (Genesis 2,18–25). It seems that in the man’s identity crisis, the woman takes over that role. Therefore, the “excellent woman” becomes “spiritual medicine” in the modern world. Following the biblical text, it can also be applied to the disease of today. Often prayer and consecration to the Holy Spirit save human lives. In a healthy marriage, there is a place for healing all wounds.

Conclusion

With his busyness and courage, Jeromeo Mileta took care of his Christian people during the time of communist Yugoslavia. He wanted to share his courage with God’s people. His motivation was to encourage the exhausted people. That is why the reader can find so many encouraging

messages from the Lenten epistles, especially this one from 1934.

Miletus, full of confidence and faith in God’s word, applies the medicine of “strength” to his flock, which is experiencing religious and moral troubles. It can be concluded that Mileta uses the biblical translation from Proverbs 31:10 according to his discretion, but in the spirit of the permitted translation. With this, he connects the medicine against disintegration, and especially against suicidal death, with the figure of a “strong woman” known in modern translation as an “excellent woman”. It must be admitted that many still do not understand the term “excellent woman” and we believe that it is better to say Mileta “strong woman” because the message is clearer and understandable even for a modern reader.

Furthermore, strength is associated with the action of the Holy Spirit. There is a gift of strength. Although the bishop of Sibenik does not mention any special devotions to the Holy Spirit, he still cries out for the need for strength. The image of a “strong woman” is not only a characteristic of the female gender. An excellent, that is, a brave and strong woman becomes an incentive for men in that era, as well as in ours. Strength is a gift. It is also a medicine – Wisdom – belonging to God and studying his word.

Even though communism no longer rules and there is no Yugoslavia, Bishop Mileta’s words can remain an encouragement for many even today.

The “strong woman” as the aforementioned personification of Wisdom (Proverbs 31:1–31) becomes the biblical basis of the Lenten epistle from 1934, but also a symbol of the fight against injustice.

The biblical text about the “strong woman” can still be a remedy against today’s problems such as numerous suicides. Bishop Jeronim’s epistles are timeless because they are inspired by God’s word and as such offer the possibility of better prosperity.

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