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RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TEACHER BEFORE SOME
CHALLENGES OF PANDEMIC, EARTHQUAKE AND
MIGRATION – SPIRITUAL ASPECT

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Summary

The coronavirus pandemic, and no less the earthquake, together with the challenges we face in migration, have caused numerous problems in the lives of many people who are looking for answers, both in professional and personal, in spiritual and religious life. Therefore, the first part of this paper elaborates some features of life during the pandemic that affected the whole world, the earthquakes that hit Zagreb and Sisak-Moslavina counties as well as the population of migrants, primarily observed in a spiritual-religious context. Who is more called than a religious education teacher to provide an answer to the fundamental question of what it really means to believe and live the faith today, in this time of challenge and temptation? A credible answer to modern challenges can be given only by a religious education teacher who is a “convincingly convinced believer” with an intense witness dimension, a witness of God’s love and mercy and a man who acknowledges, accepts and respects the differences and richness of others. The paper also used the statements of religious education teachers from in-depth interviews conducted by qualitative research in the Zagreb Archdiocese and the Sisak Diocese.

Keywords: pandemic, earthquake, migrations, challenges, spiritual qualities of religious teachers.

INTRODUCTION

We are living in a unique period, decisive for our time. No matter what our world view is or our beliefs are, we have no choice but to admit that many old certainties have vanished. Regardless of whether we talk about Christians or people belonging to other religious denominations or world views, coronavirus pandemic confuses and unsettles us all. How do we start thinking about it and how do we deal with it? In any case, 2020 will remain deeply engraved into our memory and experience, and thus it will be remembered as a year in which relevant national and international health organizations, together with all the countries of the world, declared a pandemic. The word itself comes from a Greek word παν (*pan*)- “all, every” and δῆμος (*demos*) “people”, and it denotes sudden increase and spread of an infectious disease in broad geographic regions, of continental or global proportions.¹ It was declared a pandemic in 2020, named coronavirus, as one of a series of historical pandemics. Prior to this pandemic, Christian era was marked by five great pandemics, each causing great mortality in its time and having devastating consequences.²

Referring to Pope Francis’ social encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, I. Bodrožić, writing about the challenges in the time of the pandemic, points out that it is a global tragedy in which, together with all the damages, a positive shift appeared as well. What happened is that we have become more deeply aware of the fact that the entire world community is sailing on the same boat, so that the evil that strikes one person harms everybody else. No one is saved alone on that boat, but the only path to salvation is through communal effort. This pandemic, just as a storm at sea, reveals the extent of humanity’s vulnerability, and that it has developed all its projects, habits and priorities on false securities of exclusively earthly well-being.³

Another challenge faced by some parts of Croatia, namely City of Zagreb, Zagreb County and Sisak-Moslavina County, was

¹ See Miquel Porta, *A Dictionary of Epidemiology*, Oxford, University Press, Oxford 2008, 179.

² About previous pandemics, as well as the current one, see: Tonči Matulić, Činjenice i izazovi pandemije SARS-COV 2, *Bogoslovska smotra* 90 (2020) 4, 743-755., here 744.

³ See *Fratelli tutti. Enciklika o bratstvu i socijalnom prijateljstvu*, Kršćanska sadašnjost, Zagreb, 2020, no. 32-36. Also see Ivan Bodrožić, Izazovi u vrijeme COVIDa-19, *Crkva u svijetu* 55 (2020) 4, 675-678.

the earthquake that happened on 22 March 2020 with the force of 5.5 magnitude of the Richter scale; it will surely remain permanently and deeply etched into the memories of all who experienced it. Apart from material damage, the earthquake left its consequences on the mental health of the citizens, which was additionally damaged by a strong earthquake in Petrinja on 29 December 2020. The second earthquake not only disturbed and frightened the people of that region, but also caused great material damage.⁴

Discussing population migration, it should be taken into account that, although migration is known from the beginning of humanity and is one of the basic human rights, it has brought many challenges to Europe in the past decades, so that the European Christians have found themselves at odds how to reconcile the basic Christian attitude that every man should be our neighbour (see Lk. 10:25-37) with the fear for the survival of the Christian identity of the Old Continent.⁵ It is an indisputable fact that the phenomenon of the migration crisis in the European Union is also one of the challenges of the present time which encourages us to increasingly question ourselves on the issue of the number of natives and foreigners in any city or country. It also encourages us to consider the identity and the possibilities of cohabitation, as well as the extent to which “advanced standards” and “population migration” are something that builds or destroys our communities. Considering the fact that this problem will be dealt with in specific thematic analyses, this paper will be restricted only to the fact that there is a challenge to which a contemporary religious education teacher cannot and will not turn a deaf ear, even more so when we take into consideration that at the very beginning of his encyclical Pope Francis invites us to recognize the dignity of every man and woman and to rekindle universal aspiration for brotherhood with everybody in this our time.⁶

The paper has two parts. The first part gives some characteristics of life as related to the time of the pandemic, earthquake and migration. The object of the research of the second part is mostly focused on the main characteristics of spiritual-religious

⁴ See Tihana Bonevska, Marija Grlić, Mateja Horvat, *Zagrebački potres 22. ožujka 2020.*, *Geografski horizont* 66 (2020) 2, 21-32., here 21.

⁵ See Emanuel Petrov, *Evandeoski pristup Ivana Pavla II. migracijama kao izvoru blagostanja*, *Crkva u svijetu* 55 (2020) 3, 596-620., here 596-597.

⁶ See Papa Franjo, *Fratelli tutti. Enciklika o bratstvu i socijalnom prijateljstvu*, no. 8.

dimension of religious education teachers that are necessary for the time in question. In this paper we used only some testimonies of religious education teachers⁷ who work in primary and secondary schools that were obtained by the method of in-depth i.e. non-standardized interview⁸, also known as *narrative* interview. As this is a special form of interview in which spontaneity and ingenuity of the interviewer are used to acquire direct and multi-layered insight into delicate subject matter, the interview needs to be conducted in a relaxing and pleasant atmosphere, without any pressure caused by evaluation, and that provides the interviewee with the opportunity to give more honest and uncensored answers. In such an interview the aim of the conversation is not to obtain exact data, but to obtain as deep, specific and comprehensive insight into the research matter as possible. In order to achieve this, an interview guide, that is a questionnaire is prepared in advance, and that helps the interviewer to talk with all the interviewees about specific thematic areas on the same subject. Consequently, in the qualitative research one also uses the method of half-structured guideline (*halbstrukturiertes-leitfadenorientiertes*)⁹ which, among other things, gives a guiding principle for every interview.¹⁰

Contemporary crisis caused by pandemic, earthquake and migration, places the faithful lay religious education teachers before challenges which require from them a new pondering of their universal Christian and spiritual-religious life, and to apply their religious beliefs to their work with religious students in ele-

⁷ The entire sociological qualitative research with detailed research methodology entitled *Odgovornost, vjeronaučitelji i vjeronaučiteljice pred izazovima pandemije i potresa* will be published in issue no. 2 of the journal *Diacivensia* by Catholic Faculty of Theology in Đakovo, which is a part of the University of Josip Juraj Strossmayer in Osijek, in 2022.

⁸ See G. Milas, *Istraživačke metode u psihologiji i drugim društvenim znanostima*, Naklada Slap, Jastrebarsko, 2009, 586-587.

⁹ See Marlene Bock, *Das halbstrukturierte-leitfadenorientierte Tiefeninterview: Theorie und Praxis der Methode am Beispiel von Paarinterviews*, u: Jürgen Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik (ur.), *Analyse verbaler Daten. Über den Umgang mit qualitativen Daten*, Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen, 1992, 90-109.

¹⁰ More about the approach and techniques of qualitative research see in: Goran Milas, *Istraživačke metode u psihologiji i drugim društvenim znanostima*, 571-601; Anton BUCHER, *Einführung in die empirische Sozialwissenschaft*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1994., 54; cf. also: Kata Amabilis Jurić, *Duhovnost vjeronaučitelja vjernika laika u suvremenim hrvatskim crkveno-društvenim uvjetima*, Kršćanska sadašnjost, 2015., 216.

mentary and high schools and parishes. Thus the main aim of the paper is to show only some deliberations and attitudes of religious education teachers, which is their way of dealing with all the uncertainties of the time of pandemic, earthquake and migration and how this new reality influences their educational work regardless of whether they work in primary or secondary schools.

1. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF LIFE IN THE TIMES OF THE PANDEMIC AND MIGRATION

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Numerous detailed analyses of the time of pandemic, earthquake and migration can be found in both scientific and expert literature. This paper singles out only some features that characterize that time, giving a lay religious education teacher an opportunity for a more in-depth understanding of the whole situation.

1.1. *The experience of pain and suffering caused by the all-pervasiveness of coronavirus, earthquake and migration*

We are living in a time of different experiences of pain and suffering. A great number of them is caused directly or indirectly by the pandemic of still insufficiently known coronavirus, earthquake and migration. The questions such as what the origin of the virus is, how to deal with it and what the future holds are still open for debate (no one actually understands what is going on).¹¹ Affected by the pandemic, the entire social community finds itself in great uncertainty, we could even say that in some situations it has been brought to the brink of despair, and that causes us to feel immense human helplessness which then forces people to think and act differently than up to now.

People who live in the regions affected by the earthquake have been additionally exposed to the feelings of uncertainty, fear and anxiety, and consequently they have had a great need for psychiatric and psychological help. However, in the time of the pandemic, emergency services in Croatia were primarily directed towards those who were exposed to the mental influence of the

¹¹ See Ante Vučković, *Bol i smisao, Crkva u svijetu* 55 (2020) 3, 391-394, here 394.

pandemic, and so the resources available for the natural disasters such as earthquake were limited.¹²

Everything mentioned so far has had an influence on mental health – many people are agitated and have symptoms of psychological disturbances. In such atmosphere personal stability and the integrity of the majority of individuals is endangered, and that is reflected not only on psychological, but also on spiritual dimension. This pandemic, and to an equal extent the earthquake, have lasting effects not only on the body, but also on the soul, so much so that, according to some researches, the number of people with suicidal thoughts has increased¹³ as a consequence of the challenging pandemic state of contemporary society.¹⁴ In addition to this, A. Vučković notices the fact that the virus is everywhere, among us, in our conversations, our fears and strategies. Although it cannot be seen, we perceive everything through it, and in that context many issues are imposed, not only related to the scientific and medical mastering of the virus, but also those related to everyday life: wearing masks, meetings, contacts, fear of infection, loneliness, feelings of abandonment and captivity, celebrating the Eucharist, distrust, online classes¹⁵ etc. It is to be expected that in such atmosphere the fears of loneliness, disease, dictatorship, loss of freedom, impoverishment, impossibility of ordinary former life is on the increase. All this leads to a distortion of reality, augmented not only by the adherents of the numerous conspiracy theories, but also by the exaggerated fears that are related not only to the individual, but, in a certain

¹² See Vjekoslav Peitl, Vedrana Golubić Zatezalo, Dalibor Karlović, Mental Health Issues and Psychological Crisis Interventions During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Earthquakes in Croatia, *International Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences*, 56 (2020.) 2, 193-198., here 196.

¹³ See Petrana Brečić, Tihana Jendričko, Domagoj Vidović, Utjecaj pandemije COVID-19 na pacijente s anksioznim i depresivnim poremećajima, *Medicus* 29 (2020) 2, 237-242. In this paper the authors conclude that, observing from the aspect of people inflicted with anxiety disorder and depression as related to the pandemic, the need arose to accept the fact that the population in question is vulnerable and in need of comprehensive availability of continuing psychiatric care.

¹⁴ See Ivan Bodrožić, Izazovi u vrijeme COVIDa-19, *Crkva u svijetu* 55 (2020) 4, 675-678, here 675.

¹⁵ More on the attitudes of teachers and parents related to various aspects of online school see: Natalija Čurković, Sandro Krašić i Ivana Katavić, Stavovi učitelja i roditelja učenika osnovnih škola o nastavi na daljinu, *Odgojno-obrazovne teme* 3 (2020.) 5, 5-24; More on the difficulties related to education in times of shortages see: Jadranka Garmaz, Muke s odgojem u oskudnim vremenima, *Crkva u svijetu* 56 (2021) 1, 3-6.

way, become common to us all.¹⁶ In his small but inspiring work *Where is God in a Coronavirus World?*, British author John C. Lennox gives guidelines what the attitude of the Christians to the coronavirus pandemic should be. He points out that a true perspective should be retained, meaning that one should use common sense and collect oneself, because panic and fear are not helpful, and neither is the exaggeration of the situation.¹⁷ In this context the occurrence of an earthquake completely takes away the feeling of control and thus leads to helplessness creating the feeling of anxiety. In order for the fear and anxiety not to become pathological occurrences and thus block all our actions, psychology experts suggest a series of ways in which one can help oneself to actively face those feelings and overcome them.¹⁸

The experiences of various pains and sufferings can also be seen in migrant population whose state is best outlined by Pope Francis in the second chapter of the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* on the example of the parable of the Merciful Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37). The Pope justly entitled this parable *A Stranger on the Road* in order to vividly depict what our attitude towards migrants should be like. Among other things, the Pope points out that for Christians the words of the parable have one other, transcendental dimension, which implicitly includes the fact that we should recognize Christ himself in every abandoned and excluded brother (see Mt. 25, 40, 45). Furthermore, he argues that faith has untold power to inspire and sustain our respect for others, because the one who believes realizes that God loves every human being with infinite love and in doing so confers infinite dignity upon every human being.¹⁹

1.2. Attitude towards health from the religious aspect

In the past when a disaster would strike the western world, people would hasten to churches, seeking God and his close-

¹⁶ See Ante Vučković, *Uvijek iznova valja donositi odluku da ću biti bolji čovjek, ne zapustiti se ni tijelom ni duhom*, <https://www.novolist.hr/ostalo/kultura/knjizevnost/>, (30 March 2021).

¹⁷ See John Lennox, *Gdje je Bog u doba koronavirusa?*, Verbum, Split, 2020, 56.

¹⁸ More on that see: Andreja Kostelić-Martić, *Strah i anksioznost od pandemije, koronavirusa i potresa: Kako si možemo pomoći?*, Andreja Bogdan et al. (ed.), *Koronavirus i mentalno zdravlje. Psihološki aspekti, savjeti i preporuke*, Hrvatska psihološka komora, Zagreb, 2020, 48-53., here 49-51.

¹⁹ See Papa Franjo, *Fratelli tutti.*, no. 56-86., here no. 85.

ness, and the leaders of certain countries would call their citizens to prayer. Today, however, we are witnessing a complete reversal as the number of people who count on God in their lives keeps dwindling, state leaders demand closing of the churches or bringing the pastoral and liturgical action to a minimum, and the Church more or less obediently accepts and observes those demands. Instead of fixing our gaze on God Jesus Christ and his prophets, contemporary world, and to a great extent Christians themselves, regard epidemiologists and pharmaceutical companies as new prophets and expect salvation and liberation from the vaccine.²⁰ It is significant to notice that both big *lockdowns* in Europe during corona crisis happened around Easter and Christmas, and also the vaccine began to be distributed in Europe and Croatia around Christmas holidays, making its arrival, and not the birth of Jesus Christ, a sign of salvation and hope for Europe. However, this neglect of God and reliance on physical health and worldly prophets did not appear with corona crisis, but the withering of Christian faith, i.e. turning away from God and forgetting God²¹, has been going on for a long time especially in Europe and in the West. The faith in God and eternal salvation has unfortunately been replaced by the faith in man and his abilities, in medicine and technology, as the new means of salvation and the belief in health as the highest good.²² The relationship to technology and health, including profit and money, has adopted the characteristics of religiosity, as is provocatively described by Manfred Lütz: "Our ancestors built cathedrals, we build clinics. Our ancestors would fall on their knees... saving their souls, and we save our looks. Without doubt, we have a new religion: the religion of health. To avoid death, we deny ourselves life."²³ The care for the body and health burdens contemporary

²⁰ More on vaccines see in: Josip Mužić, *Sloboda izbora i cijepljenje, Moralno promišljanje o cjepljivima povezano s pobačajem*, <https://www.vjeraidjela.com/author/josipmuzic/>, (30 March 2021).

²¹ See Ivan Kordić, *Je li čovjek izguran iz istine? Heidegerov zaborav bitka i Boga, Obnovljeni život* 63 (2008) 4, 389-415; Ivica Raguž, *Gnjilež i koronavirus: Faraon ili Ninivljani?*, *Svjetlo riječi* 38 (2020) 445, 78-79.

²² See Davor Vuković, *Duhovna dimenzija borbe protiv koronavirusa, Diacovensia* 29 (2021) 1, 5-10, here 7.

²³ Manfred Lütz, *Užitak života. Protiv terora dijete, manije zdravlja i kulta fitnessa*, Verbum, Split, 2015, 16.

man to such an extent that today we can talk about “body” cult and health as the religion “of this world”.²⁴

It is known that the Regulation of celebrating the Holy Mass without people caused a kind of a schism among the believers and priests to such an extent that the tragedy of earthquake in Zagreb was considered as a “punishment”²⁵ for the first Sunday without people at Mass, and that the fact that churches and the Cathedral were the ones that suffered huge damage was significant. To consider God as the avenger not only for the earthquake in Zagreb, but also in Sisak-Moslavina County is completely a wrong kind of moralising, because such revelation of God in Jesus Christ does not belong to the Good News. Those who believe that the earthquake and the virus are a punishment from God understand nothing of Jesus’ message, that is Jesus’ attitude as described in the Gospel according to Luke (see Lk. 13:1-5). Jesus is very clear when he states that natural disasters and epidemics are an opportunity to convert and order our lives as much as possible according to the will of God. There are many testimonies in the Bible in which afflictions were an opportunity to convert, to self-reflect, to change the attitude that was not in accordance with the will of God.²⁶ However, if we observe everything from the spiritual and Christian aspect, we will notice that the greatest good is God of Jesus Christ and his Kingdom, i.e. the faith in God and the hope of eternal life and salvation. The pandemic, i.e. corona crisis, is only an opportunity to renew once again the faith and trust in God, that is to seek first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness (see Mt. 6:33), and to use correctly all other earthly goods.²⁷ Along these lines Pope Francis maintains that a certain transformation of the way of thinking

²⁴ On the challenges of the modern-day absoluteness of health see: s. Nela Veronika Gašpar, Kontekst i izazovi današnjeg apsolutiziranja zdravlja, *Vjesnik Dakovačko-osječke nadbiskupije* 148 (2020) 6, 9-14.; also on the postmodern understanding of human health see: Karl Gabriel, *Gesundheit als Ersatzreligion*, Gregor Maria Hoff, Christoph Klein, Matthias Volkenandt (ur.) *Zwischen Ersatzreligion und neuen Heilserwartungen. Umdeutung von Gesundheit und Krankheit*, Alber, Freiburg/München, 2010.

²⁵ See Ivica Raguž, *Cave minantem!* Meditacija o Bogu osvetniku koji kažnjava i druge meditacije, *Communio* 46 (2020)138, 104-135., 109-113 i 117-120.

²⁶ See Ante Vučković, *Potres i koronavirus nisu Božje kazne, tko tako misli nije razumio Isusa*, <https://hkm.hr/vjera/fra-ante-vuckovic-potres-i-koronavirus-nisu-bozje-kazne-tko-tako-misli-nije-razumio-isusa/>, (30 March 2021).

²⁷ See Davor Vuković, Duhovna dimenzija borbe protiv koronavirusa, 7.

and behaving might arise out of that all: “The pain, uncertainty and fear, and the realization of our own limitations, brought on by the pandemic have only made it all the more urgent that we rethink our styles of life, our relationships, the organization of our societies and, above all, the meaning of our existence,”²⁸ and this all brings us back to the source of our salvation which is in Jesus Christ.

1.3. *The testimonies of the interviewed religious education teachers on pandemic and earthquake*

The reflections on the characteristics of life in the time of pandemic and earthquake are supplemented by the testimonies of the interviewed religious education teachers obtained by qualitative research, using the method of semi-structured in-depth interview,²⁹ conducted in Zagreb County and the Diocese of Sisak.³⁰ One religious education teacher gives the following praiseworthy answer to the question: Which universal human and religious attitudes enable you to reflect on and interpret newly arisen situations related to the time of pandemic and earthquake, the time we are living in at the moment?

“This corona showed that we are no good and that we have put health as “a golden calf” in the centre of our attention (*she was saying this slowly and energetically, a little bit angrily*); we worship it, but where is our God in all this? If God, family and my neighbour aren’t placed first in our lives, why do we bother going to church? So, the situation isn’t good, we should worship only God, and He is the only one we should serve, and not all those regulations and rules, and even our health will be set down

²⁸ Papa Franjo, *Fratelli tutti.*, no. 33

²⁹ On the approach and techniques of qualitative research see: Goran Milas, *Istraživačke metode u psihologiji i drugim društvenim znanostima*, 571-601.

³⁰ The author of this scientific paper, in accordance to the methodological directions for qualitative research and the Opinion on ethical consent of the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Zagreb, conducted a sociological qualitative research entitled *Odgojiteljice te vjeroučitelji i vjeroučiteljice pred izazovima pandemije i potresa* (Educators and religious teachers facing the challenges of pandemics and earthquakes) in the period between 15 February and 30 March 2021. The research included 21 religious education teachers: thirteen in Zagreb county and eight in Sisak-Moslavina County. The analysis and interpretation of results of the research will be published in one of the scientific papers. All audio and transcribed recordings are stored on an external drive and kept by the research supervisor.

when we go to eternal life. Thanks be to God and corona which showed that there won't be masses of believers, but only the selected ones. We will obviously have to have again small home communities through which we will join into our parish communities, but with true faith, since this external one is so grotesque that it should better be removed, because what is required today is true spirituality and real witnessing of faith."³¹

Another religious education teacher gave the following answer to the question: According to your own reflection about the time of the pandemic, what do you notice, what is it all about, what is happening to us, what kind of time are we living in, how would you describe it?

"Pandemic, even favoured by the media, has nevertheless brought us back to what we have lost, because we were terrible materialists; I think that this materialistic attitude has gone the wrong way. People started paying attention to what they were wearing, what other people were wearing, and that was the way we started valuing people. Apart from bringing a myriad of those horrible things, diseases and everything, the pandemic has also made me think why it has separated me from different people, even from going to church. It stopped us. In our family we turned to each other, though, we became closer to each other, we constantly played some party games, we started communicating more. So, I don't see it all in a negative way, there are those positive things as well. However, I had the opportunity to observe several families of my students who were divorced and they had a completely different experience: some started misusing alcohol, verbal aggression appeared in situations in which people decided they couldn't live together any more. I'm talking here about marriages that had lasted for 15 to 20 years, not three or four, so this pandemic has opened or unfortunately closed the eyes of some people. Did it have to happen for the people to open their eyes and start thinking that man was what mattered? Because, what should be most important for us is to love our neighbour. It is obvious that people didn't know themselves or they don't know themselves, so they have distanced themselves from others."³²

³¹ Kata s. Amabilis Jurić, *Odgojiteljice te vjeroučitelji i vjeroučiteljice pred izazovima pandemije i potresa*, Zagreb, 2021, Interview no. 17.

³² Kata s. Amabilis Jurić, *Odgojiteljice te vjeroučitelji i vjeroučiteljice pred izazovima pandemije i potresa*, Interview no. 4.

Regarding the earthquake, here is a statement by a religious education teacher on the children's reaction to the earthquake. The question was: What was your experience of the earthquakes in Zagreb and Sisak?

"The children had the most difficult time. I have two girls, one is a primary and the other is a secondary school student. It was so stressful for them that they didn't dare to go upstairs. They moved their things downstairs and started sleeping there, too. They slept with their clothes on for a long time, so there was panic for a long time. The younger girl got relaxed only when a friend came over to play and I told her to invite my daughter to play upstairs, and so they forgot the fear a little bit and went upstairs. In fact, children are the best medicine to each other. One should give oneself time to calm down, because it was really stressful."³³

On the other hand, here is a statement by a religious education teacher from the region that was affected by the earthquake who has a completely different attitude. He gives the following answer to the question: What is your personal experience of the time of the pandemic and earthquake?

"It is good that we got shaken, to finally realize what matters in life. Not to rely on material things, although that is also needed, but to find our support in Jesus Christ."³⁴

2. MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS OF SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TEACHERS AT THE TIME OF PANDEMIC, EARTHQUAKE AND MIGRATION

Before we move on to the spiritual and religious qualities of religious education teachers as an answer to the challenges and crisis present in the time we live in, it is important to remind ourselves, in the context of the main topic of the symposium *To Incite Creativity – Learning and Teaching Challenges in the Context of Pandemic and Migration*, to the fact that the results of global research by the UNESCO International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century confirm the basic principle through which education should contribute to the versatile development of each individual in the areas of spir-

³³ Ibid., Interview no. 16.

³⁴ Ibid., Interview no. 15.

it, body, intelligence, sensitivity, appreciation of beauty, personal responsibilities and spiritual values. Specifically, successful education has to be based on the organisation of four fundamental pivots of learning: *learn to know, learn to do, learn to live together*³⁵ and *learn to be*, whose tasks result from the first three pivots.³⁶ Already mentioned three-dimensional outline (*be-know-do*) had appeared in theological-catechetical literature before the research by the UNESCO Commission,³⁷ and as such it had been codified in the general document of the Church Magisterium.³⁸ In this context, religious profile of religious education teachers refers to their *being*, according to which they are, among other things, called to be mediators between faith and culture, to be the people of dialogue with human-religious virtues, both in a Croatian school and parish community. In this paper, due to space limitations, we present only some spiritual-religious qualities of the contemporary religious education teacher as an answer to the challenges of pandemic, earthquake and migration followed by actual statements taken from the in-depth interviews of the qualitative research.

2.1. Religious education teacher – “Convincingly convinced believer” with intense witness dimension

Today more than ever a need for the return to mysticism, that is stronger experiential living of religious beliefs, has arisen in Christian regions.³⁹ This need was skilfully recognized by Karl Rahner who summarised it in a well-known sentence which says that the Christian of tomorrow will be a “mystic” who “has experienced something, or he will not exist at all”.⁴⁰ Many theologians,

³⁵ See Ana Thea Filipović, Učiti živjeti zajedno. *Dimenzija socijalnog učenja u pedagoškoj i teološkoj perspektivi*, Kršćanska sadašnjost, Zagreb, 2017, 69-90.

³⁶ See Jaques Delors, (ur.), *Učenje – blago u nama*, Educa, Zagreb, 1996, 95-96

³⁷ See Emilio Alberich, *Kateheza danas. Priručnik fundamentalne katehetike*, Katehetski salezijanski centar, Zagreb, 2002, 322-325.

³⁸ See Kongregacija za kler, *Opći direktorij za katehezu*, Kršćanska sadašnjost, Zagreb, 2000, no. 238.

³⁹ See more about mysticism as the religion of the future: Peter Lengsfeld (ed.), *Mystik – Spiritualität der Zukunft, Erfahrung des Ewigen*, Herder, Freiburg – Basel – Wien, 2005.

⁴⁰ The original quote: “Der Fromme von morgen wird ein “Mystiker” sein, einer, “der etwas erfahren” hat, oder er wird nicht mehr sein, weil die Frömmigkeit von morgen nicht mehr durch die im Voraus zu einer personalen Erfahrung und Ent-

both theoreticians and practitioners, and catechists, i.e. religious education teachers, have been preoccupied with this quote. This saying is considered to be an adequate starting point for the development of contemporary forms of religious teaching of children and the young. This reality is confirmed by an interviewed religious education teacher who comes from the area afflicted by the earthquake in his answer to the following question: According to your own reflection about the time of the pandemic, what do you notice, what is it actually all about, what experiences and reflections do you connect to the reality of earthquake?

“Now is the time to really commit oneself to God even more... Now we see the realization of the prophecy by Karl Rahner that the Christians of the third millennium will be mystics or they won't exist at all. This has hit the mark 100%, a sort of division is happening now, we can't do things half-way anymore, you are either going towards God or you're not! The foundation of my vocation and activity as a religious education teacher is God, believe me, God. When I fought in the war, the army offered me to stay with them professionally, they offered a stable existence, high salary, but being a religious education teacher was more a path into the unknown. To me Abraham is one of the role models on that path. To give God to other people – that is the most beautiful thing, to help young people see him, experience him, to get to know his love through sacraments, prayer, Holy Scripture, the knowing of the saints and Church teaching... even through me as their religious education teacher”.⁴¹

Furthermore, in the encounter with the word of God a religious education teacher gains experience of the living God, God's revelation and it becomes his/her authentic proclamation. This is the real path of the religious education teacher's becoming a true witness of the invisible, because his/her eyes have, so to speak, seen Him, and his/her hands have touched the Lord, and this is the only way in which the mystery that he/she lives can become effective. What this means in real life is that he/she cannot stay cold-hearted functionary or passively repeat worn-out phrases, but he/she is someone who transmits his/her personal

scheidung einstimmige, selbstverständliche öffentliche Überzeugung [...] aller mitgetragen wird” [...] in: Karl Rahner: Frömmigkeit früher und heute, in: ders., *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. VII, Benziger, Einsiedeln u.a. 1966, 22f.

⁴¹ Kata s. Amabilis Jurić, *Odgojiteljice te vjeroučitelji i vjeroučiteljice pred izazovima pandemije i potresa*, Interview no. 10.

faith experience. If the religious education teacher's experience of Christ is true and deep, only then will he/she be able to be a true herald and the witness of the proclaimed. Thus his/her life becomes the first who the catechized people can turn to and learn from.⁴²

As an answer to the needs of spiritually hungry people in our social and cultural environment, a religious education teacher is expected not only to know well theological content, but also to be a person of a living, true, witnessing faith, "convincingly convinced believer", whose vocation and action is completely opposite to that of a "religious clerk".⁴³ Teaching witnessing religious education in school, religious education teachers can show their students in a specific manner how to imbue the contemporary society with Christian values, and so they become visible signs of the Christian message - the Gospel.⁴⁴ This is shown in a statement by a religious teacher from the area affected by the earthquake in her answer to the following question: Can you tell us what teaching children and the young actually looks like in your teaching position in the circumstance altered by the pandemic and earthquake?. She claims:

"For me, in my work as a religious education teacher of children, the most important thing is to stress the fundamental foothold that we always put our lives into God's hands, and to feel and experience in teaching the content that in God we are eternal, that we are protected, and that death is only a point in which our life is being transformed and that we shouldn't be afraid of death, and we get this through spiritual safeness and spiritual fullness: even if everything is tumbling down and is falling into ruin, in you my God I am protected, it means to pray for the peace in children, a holy peace so that we don't panic or feel helpless, to feel ourselves, being imbued with God, not to be nameless, to be sure in God, that he takes care of us. In this time of ours, it is required from me to be an authentic religious education teacher, so that children have someone to lean on, to have a visible source

⁴² See Pietro Damu, *La spiritualità del catechista. Tracce per la riflessione personale e di gruppo sui tratti che la caratterizzano*, Elledici, Leumann (Torino), 1996, 30-32.

⁴³ See Špiro Marasović, Lik vjeroučitelja za treće tisućljeće, *Kateheza* 20 (1998) 1, 4-15., here 10-11.

⁴⁴ See Jadranka Garmaz – Kristina Vukušić, Neke značajke vjeroučiteljeve duhovnosti, *Služba Božja* 55 (2015) 1, 87-103., here 94 i 97.

of confidence even when everything is falling apart. This is manifested specifically in stressing my faith, that I live it, transfer it, that for me it is impossible to live without faith and reliance on God, that one simply can't breathe without that, be without that, and neither deal with everything that is happening in this time. This is what I wake up with and what I fall asleep with, do you understand? Without that existential confidence and trust one can't survive and be a person, a human being. As a religious education teacher what I want to promote in my work with children is trueness, consistency, moral attitudes in everything, the ease of the approach to children, self-giving, personal faith, Jesus' faith as he believed, hope and love. These divine virtues are very actual today, especially hope with great optimism regardless of difficulties, not fake optimism, but the true, spiritual one, and then do all that with a smile.⁴⁵

What happens is that the life that stems from faith carries in itself a special kind of attraction that many do not want to lose after they have experienced it. However, we must admit that our contemporaries, regardless of whether they are children in primary or secondary school or their parents, very often meet with faith that is reduced to the level of moralizing and ideologizing. In contrast to this, when children and the young meet religious education teachers whose lives are characterised by experiential faith, the faith by which they deal with the circumstances we are all exposed to today, such as difficulties, weariness, disappointments, uncertainties, diseases, earthquakes, fears and the like, in a completely different way, so that they give witness to a "surplus" of human sensitivity, final joy, then everything changes, this, in a manner of speaking, catches them unprepared, it shakes them and causes in them a special interest in such a religious life.⁴⁶ This kind of witness given by religious education teachers together with its additional attractions and curiosity does not require any prerequisites to incite the interest in faith in children and the young, and this is what the interviewed religious education teachers confirm. To the question: What is your trust and faith in God like, in this time of the pandemic and earthquake, and how is it specifically manifested in your personal life

⁴⁵ Kata s. Amabilis Jurić, *Odgojiteljice te vjeroučitelji i vjeroučiteljice pred izazovima pandemije i potresa*, Interview no. 16.

⁴⁶ See Julian Caron – Andrea Torielli, *Gdje je Bog? Kršćanska vjera u doba velike neizujesnosti*, Kršćanska sadašnjost, Zagreb, 2020, 14-15.

and in your work with children and the young? a special attention is drawn by the following statement:

“I remember teaching the topic “Sacraments”, and I had a terribly sore throat, so I felt it as a great penitence. Nevertheless, I wanted and tried to prepare and teach the students of the last lesson in the same way as I had done those I taught first. They feel it so well, when we have this gift of faith, when we talk to them from this faith, and so I think that my witnessing faith should be the most important thing to children, children feel everything and we can’t talk about something if we aren’t like that or if at least we aren’t trying to be like that, because they see and check all”.⁴⁷

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2.2. *A religious education teacher – witness to God’s love and mercy*

Already in the second half of the 20th century did two popes, Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II, recognise clearly “the signs of times” and warned that the question of mercy should inevitably be put in the centre of Church teaching and practice. Pope John Paul II’s witness of suffering was itself the strongest preaching among all his sermons and numerous writings, so that he made the message of mercy the leading principle of his long pontificate, and it gave a distinct feature to the Church of the 21st century.⁴⁸ The state of the contemporary world gives a real opportunity to the lay religious education teacher to become aware once again what the true nature of Christianity is. As a Christian in the full sense of the word, he/she has the opportunity to rediscover, to experience the way Jesus perceived the world: “When he saw the crowds, he felt sorry for them, because they were harassed and dejected” (Mt. 9:36). Many other similar examples from the Gospels point to the fact that this letting the reality touch him is a particular Jesus’ trait. We often forget that we would not be able to observe ourselves if Christ did not lean over and is still leaning over our weakness in the hugs of those people he used and who he is using every day to reach us. The more we yield to his presence and forgiveness, the more

⁴⁷ Kata s. Amabilis Jurić, *Odgojiteljice te vjeroučitelji i vjeroučiteljice pred izazovima pandemije i potresa*, Interview no. 13.

⁴⁸ See Walter Kasper, *Milosrđe, Temeljni pojam evanđelja – ključ kršćanskoga života*, Kršćanska Sadašnjost, Zagreb, 2015, 17-19.

he encourages us to hug someone else, to sympathise with their suffering. The hug that is mentioned here is not a result of sentimental feelings, but actually it is Jesus' merciful look directed towards every human being.⁴⁹ It is exactly with that merciful look which Christ brought into the world that the contemporary religious education teacher becomes the witness of divine love revealed in Jesus Christ. Besides, he/she is also called to find ways in which to love his/her students as well as everyone he/she meets in his/her work, whether in school or in parish community. Sometimes this merciful love goes so far that it demands the entire person, even to the point of damage to one's own life, because it is the love with which Christ, dying on the cross, loved every human being. Such and similar examples of selfless love and serving one's neighbour can be found throughout the history of the Church. In our time we should add the examples witnessed by our religious education teachers. In this context a statement by a religious education teacher from the area affected by the earthquake should be given. His answer to the question: What was your experience of the earthquakes in Zagreb and Sisak? was:

"I immediately started calling my students whose phone numbers I had to hear how they were, so they told me everything that had happened, and I noticed how important this was to them, so that they felt certain safety. And then what the evangelist John says that there is no fear in love, so we should not think about the fear, but about others, how they are and how they are experiencing things, to go and help them. This is the love God fills us with, that's why we can give it to others, because He was the one who loved us first, so we have to love others and, obviously, if you have the experience of God's love, then you can give it to others".⁵⁰

Another religious education teacher, to the question: How, in what way do you personally experience the time of the pandemic, and the presence of the coronavirus? What were the dominant feelings that you felt in the moments of the earthquake, and how do you emotionally cope with the fact of the coronavirus that is still with us? claims:

⁴⁹ See Julian Caron, Andrea Torielli, *Gdje je Bog? Kršćanska vjera u doba velike neizujesnosti*, 28-29, 36-37.

⁵⁰ Kata s. Amabilis Jurić, *Odgojiteljice te vjeroučitelji i vjeroučiteljice pred izazovima pandemije i potresa*, Interview no. 10.

“...but I also know that God is love and that He is above all mercy, and that anyone can judge me and speak about me in whatever way they want, but He looks into my heart and I get limitless strength from His heart, mercy, and that is what gives me strength for this time and for the relationship with my students”.⁵¹

2.3. A religious education teacher – an example of acceptance and respect of the differences of others

Contemporary global migration crisis in various ways influences pastoral activities of Pope Francis who, from the beginning of his papacy, comes across it almost daily not only on local, but also on global, i.e. world level, as witnessed by various media and many of his speeches and documents.⁵² In *Fratelli Tutti* the Pope believes that, if the claim that all human beings are brothers and sisters not only as a general idea, but if it becomes a concrete reality, then a series of issues arise which cannot leave us indifferent, but force us to look at things in a new light and look for new responses.⁵³

Searching for various ways of accepting and respecting differences, the richness of accepting and understanding others and co-living with people different from oneself was a challenge to one interviewed primary school religious education teacher who, in answer to the following question: What is your trust and faith in God like, in this time of the pandemic and earthquake, and how is it specifically manifested in your personal life and in your work

⁵¹ Ibid. Interview no. 7.

⁵² See Papa Franjo, *Lumen fidei – svjetlo vjere, Enciklika vrhovnog svećenika Franje biskupima, prezbiterima i đakonima, posvećenim osobama i svim vjernicima laicima o vjeri*, Kršćanska sadašnjost, Zagreb, 2013, *Evangelii gaudium – Radost evanđelja, Apostolska pobudnica biskupima, prezbiterima i đakonima, posvećenim osobama i svim vjernicima laicima o naviještanju evanđelja u današnjem svijetu*, 2013, no. 23., 59., 74., 101., 103., 113., 115., 128., 169., 179., 197., 199., 210., 211., 212., 213., 228., 272; *Laudato si – Enciklika o brizi za zajednički dom*, 2015, no. 90., 91., 92., 154., 155., 228., 229; *Amoris letitia – Radost ljubavi, Posinodalna apostolska pobudnica biskupima prezbiterima i đakonima, posvećenim osobama, kršćanskim supružima i svim vjernicima laicima o ljubavi u obitelji* 2016, no. 109., 110., 137., 138; *Cristus vivit – Krist živi, Posinodska apostolska pobudnica svetoga oca Franje mladima i cijelome Božjem narodu* 2019, no. 91., 92., 93., 94., 95.; *Fratelli tutti – Enciklika o bratstvu i socijalnom prijateljstvu*, 2020, no. 22., 23., 24., 40., 41., 42., 52., 67., 81., 85., 86., 97., 101., 106., 107., 129., 133., 134., 147., 191., 203., 215., 218., 273.

⁵³ See Papa Franjo, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 128.

with children and the young?, gave witness of his implementation of *Change*, a project by Jesuit refugee service:

“I must admit that my students started this project enthusiastically and with great expectations. The aim of the project was to show them the life of migrants and a positive attitude towards them. The project itself had several phases, and the most expected one was meeting a young man from Iraq who came to Jesuit refugee service in Dubrava. This phase was preceded by presenting other cultures different from ours, possible prejudices and acceptance in differences. The task given to students was to imagine the journey that that young man had to make coming from Iraq to Croatia, and they had to make posters about it which were displayed in school. Also, they wrote him a poem in Croatian which would be translated into English and set to music as an incentive and a call to change our attitude towards those who were different from us. They even learnt a few words in order to be able to greet him in his Arabic language. The meeting was characterised by a spontaneous atmosphere which enabled the removal of invisible barriers, which are often imposed in such meetings, with lots of questions the students asked tirelessly. The young man spoke in Croatian very openly about his family, his work, his people, culture, his Muslim faith, the life of the young and so on. It was nice to notice how barriers and prejudices against migrants gradually disappeared through spontaneous communication. It was an interesting experience for me, too, because although I’m a religious education teacher who teaches and informs students, once again I got surprised how lovely it was when information turned into formation. The openness to others and to the different as taught by Jesus himself, and yet rootedness in personal riches of one’s own faith and culture is one of the guiding principles in our contemporary world which keeps on changing, and that also enables us to communicate with people of different world views, cultures and religions, as was shown by the meeting I described.”⁵⁴

During his pastoral visit to Germany in 1981, in a special meeting with Polish emigrants who, due to historical reasons, had been living in that country for decades, Pope John Paul II gave a definition of the term *emigrant* when he pointed out that

⁵⁴ Kata s. Amabilis Jurić, *Odgoviteljice te vjeroučiteljice i vjeroučiteljice pred izazovima pandemije i potresa*, Interview no. 8.

those are: “real people who want to live, develop, maintain their identity, rights, freedoms, faith and dignity”⁵⁵ in the country they came to and in which they want to be accepted. This is the attitude towards migrants which characterised all other discourses and his intercessions for the migrants during his entire pontificate. From the Pope’s definition, and from the above mentioned religious education teacher’s statement, it follows that migration targets basic values of human identity and dignity, but also the realization of our human mission through progress and the development of community with God himself and with other people, as well as with the visible world. It is an approach that is indispensable in the teaching of John Paul II and his perspective which stems from true prosperity and which flows into eschatological celebration through public good.⁵⁶ This very approach and perspective remains even for the Croatian religious education teacher and believer, a continuing challenge and task if he/she wants to remain authentic in acceptance, respect and appreciation of the differences of others.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION

In this paper we have reached a conclusive realization that pandemic, earthquakes and no less migration have conditioned numerous challenges in the lives of many people who are looking for the answers to the fundamental existential questions. This complex situation is where contemporary lay religious education teachers find themselves. It, in a way, tests their faith and theology, it represents conditions to which they, as representatives of the Church, have to react efficaciously with their Christian reflections and actions or they will lose their credibility. In this context it can be stated that solid theological, but also religious and pedagogical training of religious education teachers, in addition to being compatible with the content of theological and religious-pedagogical literature, also provides detailed analysis of the situation; using spiritual-religious view it interprets and gives meaning to the “signs of times” in such a way that their cred-

⁵⁵ Giovanni Paolo II, *Visita pastorale nella Repubblica Federale Tedesca: Discorso agli immigrati Polacchi, Magonza, 16. novembre 1980., no. 4., Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II., III-2., 1980, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1980, 1248-1249.*

⁵⁶ See Emanuel Petrov, *Evandeoski pristup Ivana Pavla II. migracijama kao izvoru blagostanja*, 599.

ibility corresponds to the actual circumstances of life in order to transfer hope, love, consolation and encouragement in these specific times, as it is evident from the qualitative research itself.

Furthermore, it can be noticed that all the interviewed religious education teachers have spiritual and religious qualities which are manifested in their workplaces in Croatian primary and secondary schools and in their parish communities in these times of pandemic, earthquakes and migration. As a result of this, they can deal with this new situation of pandemic, earthquakes and migrations bravely, courageously and authentically.

Based on the conducted qualitative research, it turns out that in addition to a quality theological and spiritual formation of religious education teachers and catechists, at least a shorter formation on behaviour and leadership in crisis situations would be more than welcome. In this way, they would acquire much-needed skills and competencies not only for their own behaviour in crisis situations but also for leading the community (classroom or the like).