

## THE CATECHIST / RELIGION TEACHER-TARGETED ABILITIES AND COMPETENCES

VASILE TIMIȘ\*

**ABSTRACT.** Knowing ones religious values represent a form of cultural security, a sign of civic and culturally attitudes. Religious education invites to reflection, to self-knowledge, to a conversion to the world of values, having the purpose of bringing communion between people and solidarity between the members of a community. Recent years have proven that the catechetical activity of the Church and the presence of religion in schools are necessary not only for religious denominations, but also for the Romanian society as a whole, which, by these rightful measures gained access to its own spirituality and to an essential tool in teaching the young.

In Romanian space, Christian belief has acted as a unifying and perpetuating factor for the nation. Being religiously initiated means to be educated, means to have the capacity to increase and to support the education. Religious realities of contemporary Romania show that the role of the religion teacher is a very important one. Given the oversizing of the urban parish, the teacher manages constantly the religious education of the young. This quasi-sacerdotal function of the religion teacher imposes certain requirements in the training of the teacher himself, in his continuous self-evaluations and self-improvement.

**Key-words:** *Educational System; Christian pedagogy, Religious Education, Catechesis, Continuous Training and Professional Development.*

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG.** Die Kenntnis von den religiösen Werte einer Person ist eine Form der kulturellen Sicherheit, ein Zeichen der bürgerlichen und kulturellen Haltungen. Religiöse Erziehung lädt zum Nachdenken, zur Selbsterkenntnis, zu einer Umwandlung in der Welt der Werte, mit dem Zweck, Kommunion zwischen den Menschen und der Solidarität, zwischen den Mitgliedern einer Gemeinschaft zu bringen. Die letzten Jahren haben gezeigt, dass die katechetische Wirken der Kirche und die Präsenz der Religion in den Schulen sind notwendig, nicht nur für die Religionsgemeinschaften, aber auch für die rumänische Gesellschaft als Ganzes, die von diesen Maßnahmen rechtmäßigen Zugang zum eigenen Spiritualität und ein wichtiges Instrument in der Lehre der junge gewinnt. Im rumänischen Raum, hat der christliche Glaube als einigende und erhalt Faktor für die Nation gehandelt.

---

\* Ph.D., Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, [vasile\\_timis@yahoo.fr](mailto:vasile_timis@yahoo.fr)

Religiös initiiert sein, bedeutet, erzogen sein und die Fähigkeit die Bildung zu erhöhen und zu unterstützen. Religiöse Realitäten des heutigen Rumänien zeigen, dass die Rolle der Religionslehrer ist ein sehr wichtiges. Angesichts der Überdimensionierung der städtischen Pfarrei gelingt es der Lehrer immer wieder die religiöse Erziehung der Jugend zu erledigen. Diese quasi-priesterliche Funktion des Religionslehrer stellt bestimmte Anforderungen in der Ausbildung der Lehrer selbst, in seinem kontinuierlichen Selbstbewertungen und sich selbst zu verbessern.

**Schlüsselwörter:** *Bildungssystem; Christliche Pädagogik, Religionsunterricht, die Katechese, kontinuierliche Aus- und Weiterbildung.*

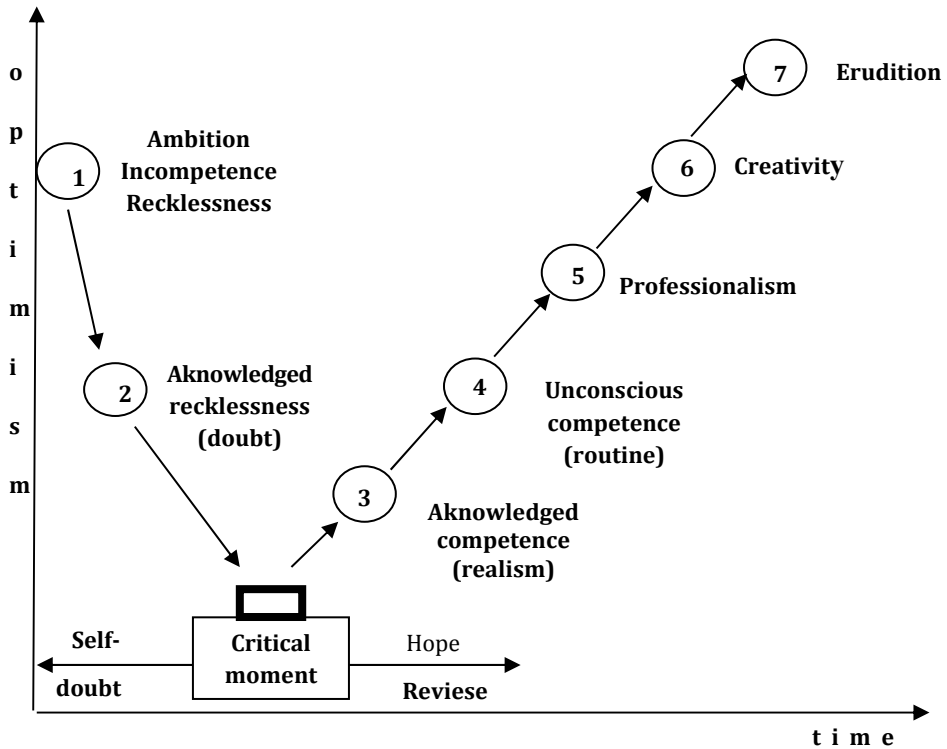
The religion teacher/the catechist is the mentor and the leader to any catechetical and educational activities of religious significance, he gives meaning and finality to the proposed educational projects, objectives and sequences. The spiritual and educational dimensions of the mission of a religion teacher result from the responsibility and from the deciding role he plays in forming the spiritual, social and moral skills and attitudes of his students. Few are the professions that require from their possessor as much competence and dedication as the one of a teacher, teaching being science and art alike. With a great part of our life –the childhood, adolescence and a part of young adulthood– we entrust the teacher. This is the reason why we remember fondly the teacher who put a pen in our hand for the first time and all the other teachers that marked our lives.

Knowledge, contents and methodologies included in curriculum and in textbooks constitute latent valences in terms of moral and religious personality formation of students; they receive an educative power only by being processed by a teacher (Nicola, 1980, p: 353). Means and methods of education, even the efficient ones, receive maximum educational valences only if they are well managed by the responsible for that school subject. Nowadays, more frequently the teaching activities tend towards modern and technical directions, but even in these conditions their foundations are built on the human relationship conducted by the student-teacher binomial.

The teaching profession, as any other occupation, it the result of an accumulated specialized culture, of endowment with some contents, technics and processes. In other words, the personality of a teacher can be analyzed through the premises for choosing such a profession and for the preparation itself for this profession (Nicola, 1980, p: 354). That is to say, the personality of a religion teacher is shaped according to abilities (vocation) and according to specialty culture (theological formation). Among the components of the professional training of the religion teacher can be listed: general knowledge, specialty culture and psycho-pedagogical training.

For defining the personality of a religion schoolmaster, a constant interest in his theoretical and practical training is necessary so that he may give good answers to his students, colleagues and community. As in any other field of activity, in order to learn the teacher profession more evolution phases must be passed through.

In a graphical representation, the beginner teacher's evolution could be presented in the following drawing:



According to the graph above, we consider that learning the skills of teaching goes through several phases. We have presented several of them; of course they can be more or can be less, it varies from case to case. *In the first stage*, any beginner teacher is powered by optimism, but not always he has the abilities shaped. The deficiencies are hardly noticed by the concerned. *The second stage* is marked by the awareness of some shortcomings and also by some doubts. Over time, with some nonfulfillment, also the optimism drops. In the case of some teachers a critic moment appears; if it is accompanied by hope, it can turn into realism, pragmatism and revising, but if this critical moment is accompanied by doubt, it can turn into relinquishment.

*The third stage* is marked by realism and professional competences gaining. *Fourth stage* represents a phase of competences and achievements. A risk may appear in this phase, that of developing a capping or a routine. *The fifth stage* appears when the teacher perfects certain skills, so we may talk about professionalism. *At the sixth stage* it passes from professionalism and competence to creativity and mastery. The climax of a teaching career is, we may say, fulfilled in *a seventh stage*, when we can talk about erudition. As stated before, this phases being relative, every teacher can find himself or not in this approach. For a better outlining of the professional skills is imperative to collaborate with the colleagues of department, with colleagues from the same educational circle, with counselors, with confessors and school psychologists.

A proper training of the religion teachers is necessary considering that mastery of the psycho-pedagogic language, as a detailed knowledge of the teaching-learning process, represents an obligation for all those forming young consciences. In schools cannot be admitted non-teaching gestures and behavior, forms of brutalization and coercion of children, experiments and mistakes; ... it is not adequate to transfer from Church to school some discursive forms (preaches) that do not resonate with the new training perimeter; the methodological, catechetical and rhetoric ensemble developed in a class of students differs significantly from the one applied by the priest in Church, stated professor Constantin Cucuș (Cucuș, 1999, p: 299), one of the most discerning connoisseurs of the domain. It requires a rethinking of procedures and methods of intervention and conversation, a new language used by the priest or by the religion teacher throughout a lesson. We are warned that “slipping into the impressionist, sentimentalist exposition and resorting to verbal tiring clichés can affect students’ interest for a school subject that has profound and significant formative connotation” (Cucuș, 1999). There are a number of problems with practical incidence that have to be delimited and settled in the near future, so that the future of religion is optimized.

**Tenure and continuous training programs** represent essential elements in educating religion teachers for primary school, secondary school and high school. The main objective for these programs is to develop didactic and content related competences necessary in realizing the religious educational process. By its diversity, the actual curriculum offers the possibility to understand the subject’s contents and didactic strategies.

According to the affirmations of some authors, the concept and the principles (Tenure and Improvement Curriculum, 2002) they were built on are:

- *Continuity*, reflected in the established objectives and contents, ensuring both the integration of the initial part from the university studies and the training for teaching career;
- *Coherence*, given by organizing and articulating in a modular-thematic way the objectives, the content areas and the bibliographic references, orienting them on eliminating the conceptual-methodological repetitions, interferences and contradictions of the different approaches;
- *Development and innovation*, satisfied by introducing new subjects for initiating the candidates in the novelties of the theological studies, in raising the issue of new tendencies among teachers.

Current tenure and perfection programs target the areas and the competences necessary to deepening and mastery both disciplinary contents and didactic contents. These favored religion teachers to exert a better control of the doctrinal elements, of the design and training evaluation processes and also an optimization of the methodologies for shaping and knowledge of personality. Teaching profession imposes specific competences (Săsărman, Breaz, Lobonț, 1999, p: 178), divided into several sections:

- *Competences aimed at fulfilling effectively a social role*
  - ✓ competence to understand and then to seek to be understood
  - ✓ competence to prioritize
  - ✓ competence to anticipate
- *Basic didactic competences*
  - ✓ empathy, communication, creativity
  - ✓ ability to relate and communicate
  - ✓ research and innovation
- *Abilities and skills regarding the specialty*
  - ✓ to assimilate and master the scientific content specific to religion
  - ✓ to do interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and trans-disciplinary correlations
  - ✓ to capture pedagogical and educational aspects of religion
  - ✓ to structure and adapt the curriculum
  - ✓ to motivate students to think from the perspective of Gospel
  - ✓ to adapt religion contents according to the psycho-pedagogic development stage of the students
  - ✓ to facilitate the skill to understand the moral and religious issues
- *Abilities and skills in general didactics and religion didactics*
  - ✓ to adapt, process and transform the curriculum according to specific educational situations
  - ✓ to understand the spiritual and psychological structure of students

- ✓ to understand the interferences between school psycho-pedagogy and religion didactics
- ✓ the capacity to diagnose and analyze the spiritual state of a group of students and of the students taken individually
- ✓ the capacity to raise students' interest and motivation to actively participate to religion classes
- ✓ the capacity to understand relationships between students, parents and teachers
- ✓ the capacity to transform group mentality
- ✓ the capacity to stimulate cooperation, mutual help, altruism, spirit of justice
- *Competences of ethnical and apologetically nature*
  - ✓ to assume professional responsibilities
  - ✓ the capacity to shape the personality and character
  - ✓ the capacity to motivate students to assume, confess and live the faith.

### **Catechetical activities and religion school classes according to students, parents and teachers**

Religion, as a school subject, is predisposing the student to many questions. This is the reason we consider pedagogical investigation leads to observations and highlights on some aspects and conclusions regarding religious education. For a clearer image on the way religion class is perceived, we asked –through certain questionnaires– the opinion of students, parents and teaches of other subjects. Aware of the fact that “the biblical message involves questioning and self-questioning” (Șanta, 2004, p:248) , we resorted to this strategy because all those involved in religious education will be richer when they have a clearer perception on the way religion school classes and every form of catechism are perceived by the society.

The survey may also be a pretext for initiating a dialog, a debate, an argumentation or counseling. It is indicated to judge religious education not only by what we want it to be, but also from the point of view of students, parents, teachers of other subjects etc. We will present below some opinions regarding these aspects.

**Students.** There have been questioned a number of 497 students from the primary, secondary and high school levels from 11 school units belonging to Cluj County School Inspectorate. The structure of the questionnaire was the following:

- *What do religion classes represent for you?*
- *Do you think religion classes help you?*

At primary school level, from 138 students, 135 said they like religion class and they feel it is useful, and 3 students said they do not particularly enjoy religion class. Here are some opinions:

- *For me religion class represent a conversation with God and a moment of joy* (Questionnaire, 4th grade, „Horea” School, Cluj-Napoca, 24.03.2003)
- *Religion classes help us to learn about the holy lives of martyrs, they urge us towards a sinless life, they help us to be closer to God* (Questionnaire, 4th grade, School no. 21, Cluj-Napoca, 24.03.2003)
- *I think religion classes help us a lot; they teach us to respect the Church and to love our parents. The most important thing is they help us to love Christ and the saints.* (Questionnaire, 4th grade, „L. Rebreanu” School, Cluj-Napoca, 25.03.2003)

At middle school level, from a number of 173 students, 165 answered they are satisfied with the religion school classes, 5 said only sometimes they like these classes and 3 replied they do not like them. Their opinions are interesting:

- *A particular and special subject because it helps us to be kinder to each other and to correct our mistakes* (Questionnaire, 4th grade, „Horea” School, Cluj-Napoca, 28.03.2003)
- *Religion class helped me to clear some things in my head because I was very confused. Everyone likes our teacher’s classes* (Questionnaire, 8th grade, „G. Voievod” Highschool, Gilău, 8.04.2003)
- *For me religion classes are the most beautiful classes, even though they are not as important as Romanian Literature classes. It is the class where I speak openly with the teacher; it is a relaxing class... During religion classes it is as if we were living in another realm, in a better, nicer world.* (Questionnaire, 8th grade, „G. Voievod” Highschool, Gilău, 8.04.2003)

From high school have been questioned 186 students, from whom 154 think that religion classes have a special role among the other subjects, 18 did not answer and 15 confessed they do not see the point of studying it. The opinions of high school students are very responsible:

- *Religion classes, for me, represent a class through which we become closer to God and we learn His Word; this way we cannot say we have not heard of the Gospel* (Questionnaire, 9th grade, Pedagogical Highschool, Cluj-Napoca, 25.03.2003).
- *I am sure religion classes help us to go on the right path and teach us how to please God and our fellow people* (Questionnaire, 9th grade, Pedagogical Highschool, Cluj-Napoca, 25.03.2003)

- *It is a relaxing class, but I do not think an extra class is what we need in the 12th grade when we are very busy (Questionnaire, 12th grade, „Avram Iancu” Highschool, Cluj-Napoca, 25.03.2003).*

**Parents.** In the second semester of 2003-2004 school year we questioned 254 parents of students who go to school units belonging to Cluj County School Inspectorate. We found that the majority of the parents are content with the way religion is taught in schools and with the way their children are guided and assisted during religion classes. We present some of the parents' opinions:

- *Religion classes help my child to realize God is by his side and he is not alone through trouble and problems. He knows the difference between good and bad (Questionnaire, „A. Iancu” School, Câmpia Turzii, 25.03.2004)*
- *I can honestly say that I am content of the moral and spiritual progress of my daughter and I have the certitude that her spiritual ascent (which I hope she will go through honestly) will take her to higher levels then it took me; they remind me fondly of my school years and, at the same time with regret, because of the absolute absence of religion classes (Questionnaire, „Gheorghe Șincai” Highschool, Cluj-Napoca, 20.03.2004)*
- *According to my daughter, religion classes are held in a normal way, they are classes where students always understand what is taught...Over the years, my daughter's progress has grown; this year thanks to her young teacher, she received answers to some questions which had not been answered for many years (Questionnaire, „Raluca Ripan” Technical Highschool, Cluj-Napoca, 20.03.2004)*
- *We are pleased that what is done is done with pleasure. It is very important that at the end of religion classes, the students walk out with the hearth opened by God...Gradually, the faith received in childhood must become personal belief...I cannot say to whom, but a request should be submitted for a found, or a found should be allocated, in order to go on pilgrimages with the kids. In addition to the knowledge assimilated in class, the students would remain, also, with the beauty of the images that would surely be imprinted in their minds. This is due to the fact that some families are indigent (Questionnaire, „V. Ungureanu” Technical Highschool, Câmpia Turzii, 21.03.2004).*

**School teachers.** Teachers of other subjects can help religion teachers in various aspects: interdisciplinary activities, inter-assisting, offering some educational resources, offering certain suggestions regarding the strategies



and methodologies used. Very interesting are the opinions and suggestion of other disciplines teachers on how to operate in schools. In order to underline this fact, we gave a questionnaire to some teachers (262 have answered) from 23 middle schools and high schools from Cluj County (June, 2003). We selected some answers and opinions:

- *Religion classes contribute in a special way to forming students' personality, to shaping their character, to forming a healthy conception about the world. It cultivates their feelings of love of fellow men and of God.*
- *Religion teacher morally supports the students and he is actively involved in their life by giving them advice (sometimes, where the class master and the parents have failed, the religion teacher has succeeded).*
- *The students are more understanding; through religion classes, the positive qualities of students are developed*
- *I consider religion class to be a special one if the teacher is competent.*
- *I consider one of the shortcomings is that the emphasis is on informing the students and not so much on shaping their personalities.*
- *In my opinion, for 1st to 4th grade the lessons are quite difficult, it is given a lot of information that is not very accessible to children; the lessons should have their starting point in surrounding realities, in children's universe. The objectives of the curriculum can be accomplished also by simple stories.*
- *Children are better behaved, they have the feeling God exists. It is a shame that religion teacher's work, in school, is not carried on by parents, at home.*

In early December 2014, the 2003 survey was repeated in order to make a comparative analysis regarding the perception on religion teaching now. The questionnaire had the following structure:

- *What is your opinion on the religion class?*
- *Do you think the religion class is necessary for everyday life?*

The questionnaire was applied in 72 school units in 5 counties: Cluj, Satu Mare, Sălaj, Bistrița and Maramureș. There have been interviewed students from 5<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, parents and teachers of other subjects. Comparative analysis of the answers, opinions and suggestions reflects the following aspects:

- Proactive interest is maintained in studying religion as a school subject of the common core curriculum;
- Students keep their interest in the subject, and at the same time, they seem captivated by active and participative methods;
- Students, and also parents, appreciate the fact that this discipline is preparing them for everyday challenges, offering models and examples worthy to be observed;

- Teachers of other subjects value the educative and formative role of the subject, and its interdisciplinary approaches.

Synthesizing, it can be stated that the contents and the educative activities specific to the subject facilitate the process of shaping desirable characters, inviting to communication and communion, both in the educative space, and in society.

The opinions and suggestions from students, parents and teachers come to certify that religious education has found its place in Romanian schools. It behooves the religion teacher to adapt his didactic speech according to particular situations from school and from society, using those school books and didactic resources which are appropriate to the age particularities of students, and also appropriate to interdisciplinary approaches.

### Conclusions

Analyzing these competences and reporting them to tenure contest, we cannot avoid including somehow our endeavor in the bivalent logical approach. This is explained by the position of religion teacher between university and school, between *poiesis* and *praxis*, between his *mentors* (university professors) and his *apprentices* (students). At the same time, the religion teacher is himself a mentor and an apprentice in his school. He is a mentor because his calling is to shape moral and religious characters, to form opinions. He will also seek to improve the flexibility and the fluidity of channels and of horizontal and vertical informational fluxes between religion and other subjects from the educational process. Historical perspective on the relationship between education and religion, underlines that education's mission and religion's mission are not mutually exclusive, but interdependent, they stimulate each other, tending to increase their interference nowadays.

The paradox of Christian teaching and communication is that everything comes from God, but the man remains fully responsible to the divine gift, "which we obtain through sacrament of Christian initiation" (Streza, Dură, 1988, p: 220). After the resurrection, Christ the Savior commands the Apostles: *therefore go and make disciples of all nations*. Risen Christ, in order to continue His work, joins His disciples saying: *And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world*. The work of God is the one that is continuous, not only that of the man. God transcends the man (the catechist) to meet the world.

Catechetical and educational activities will reach their intended purpose and finalities to the extent to which we observe more profoundly the words of Apostle Paul: *Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like*

*a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (I Cor. 9, 19-23).*

It must be admitted that in the 21st century the Gospel's message will not be transmitted as it used to be in the 19th century. Nevertheless, the same eternal values revealed by God will be transmitted. With each step, with each generation, the Church is renewing its catechetical and pastoral means; remaining constant in its principles regarding faith, but refreshing itself permanently through its means of exposing faith. Living in a world of changes, the Church is and should be sensitive to them. It seems suggestive the urge of worthy of remembrance Metropolitan Antonie Plămădeală: *to keep up with the world, but not to be like it* (Plămădeală, 1999, p: 169), to update Christian values according to each generation.

## REFERENCES

- Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură* (1990), Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al BOR, București.
- Plămădeală, A. (1999), *Biserica în mers*, vol. II, Tipografia Eparhială, Sibiu.
- Cucoș, C. (1999), *Educația religioasă. Repere teoretice și metodice*, Polirom, Iași, 1999. Legea nr. 84 din 24 iulie 1995.
- Nicola, I., (1980), *Pedagogie școlară*, EDP, București.
- Ordonanța de urgență a Guvernului nr. 36 / 1997 pentru modificarea și completarea Legii Învățământului 84 / 1995*, articolul 9 (1).
- Programa de Titularizare și Perfecționare*, disciplina Religie, Ordinul MEC nr.48981/11.11.2002.
- Protocolul Ministerului Educației nr. 9715*, cu Secretariatul de Stat pentru Culte, 10.04.1996.
- Săsărman, I., Breaz, M., Lobonț, G. (1999), *Elemente de management educațional*, Mediamira, Cluj-Napoca.
- Streza, L., Dura, N. (1998), *Studii și preocupări liturgice în Transilvania în Mitropolia Ardealului, Contribuții transilvane la teologia ortodoxă*, Tipografia Eparhială, Sibiu.
- Timiș, V. (2004), *Religia în școală - valențe eclesiale, educaționale și sociale*, Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca.

