

# CATHOLIC EDUCATION IN LITHUANIA: AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE MAIN EDUCATION SYSTEM?

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The aim of this article is to discuss whether catholic education may be approached as an alternative to the main dominating education system.

**Methods.** The research made use of the hermeneutical phenomenology access by Max van Manen (2016 a) and Linda Finlay (2009). During the research, hermeneutical phenomenology was used as the theoretical and methodological core.

**Results.** In the theoretical part, it is revealed that in the historical context, catholic education has been a traditional, re-flourishing phenomenon throughout recorded history. That is why the notion of “alternative” while speaking about a catholic school in Lithuania may be used in some extremely specific cases.

**Conclusion.** Phenomenological analysis has grasped that the chapel is indeed the incredibly special space of a catholic school that appears in the remembrance of the participants of the analysis. A relation based on trust between adults and pupils in a catholic school stimulates pupils to proceed with the same well behaviour that they witness the seniors (teachers and other pupils), as well as their peers (building team and embracing correlation), doing. The body dimension is present in several aspects: voluntary physical assistance and embracing a look at the different one, a shocking collision with a theme about one’s sexuality and a peaceful belief in resurrection of the body that provides strength and hope. The time dimension is present in two aspects: as a Kairos retreat and in other planned liturgical practices.

**Key words:** Catholic education, alternative education, inclusion, hermeneutical phenomenology, relation based on trust

## PULSATING HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

The tradition of confessional catholic schools exists since the establishment of schools in Lithuania (in 1397); by 1778, every parish in the Samogitia part of Lithuania had its own school (Misius, 2004). However, the occupational rule of Russia in 1864 began establishing Russian schools around the Orthodox Church in the cities and small rural districts, instead of the parish schools



(Zulumskytė & Lipkienė, 2003). Hence, the difficulties and dependence on private initiatives that accompanied the further establishment of catholic schools. During the time of German occupation, 20 catholic schools were established through private initiatives. Between 1918 and 1930, a rapid establishment of organisations in support of Catholic education began, during which schools were opened and united. The number of schools increased significantly in 1921, as the secondary schools were being established in almost every bigger city, while upper-secondary schools were established in the centres of administrative districts (in the same place). Thus, during the first years of independence, Catholic education spread widely, with its core ideas maintained even in private schools supported by the members of the national party in Lithuania. In 1930, the new wave of shutting down confessional schools began. The educational reforms which started in 1936 allowed different Christian organisations and abbeys to make use of the new opportunity for establishing Catholic schools (Laukaitytė, 1997).

However, the occupation by the Soviet Union destroyed any chances of Catholic education at schools. Hence, throughout that period, no new Catholic schools were established nor could schools continue their Catholic education. During the first decades after Lithuania regained its independence, the Catholic ideas, spirit and hunger for such education encouraged the renewing of previously Catholic schools and the establishment of new ones; likewise, some already established schools chose to implement Catholic education in their model (Subačius, 2015). Currently, there are 13 private Catholic schools and kindergartens, and 23 Catholic-minded schools in Lithuania (National Catholic School Association, 2017).

Hence, considering the historical context, Catholic education is traditional; a phenomenon regaining its power time and time again across different eras. That is why the term “alternative” (Černiauskaitė, 2012, p.76), when talking about the Catholic schools in Lithuania, can only be used in certain, very specific situations.

## ALTERNATIVE CATHOLIC EDUCATION AS AN OPPOSITION

During the last century, Catholic education in Lithuania has been closely connected not only with special education but also with clear opposition campaigns to the repressive rule of the occupants. For example, the Tsardom Russian rule prohibited the Catholic educational organisations; however, in Lithuania, they continued the work in the underground. Different provinces created educational associations (in 1906 a “Saulės” association was established in Kaunas province; in 1913 a “Žiburio” association was established in Suwalki governorate; an association “Ryto” was established in Vilnius province (Erminas, 2013; Juškienė, 2013). The associations were interested in establishing new schools. Catholic schools – we can call them that way because the foundation of the associations establishing the schools was “The Roman Catholic faith, and the core

goal of the activity was the Catholic upbringing of Lithuanians" (Zulumskytė & Lipkienė, 2003) – became a new source of the Lithuanian nationalism. Thus, these schools also had the function of preserving national identity.

During the German occupation, religion classes remained, but all schools were under the rule of the war government (Jašinauskas, 2005). However, the occupants were interested in neither secondary nor higher education. This allowed Catholic organisations to continue establishing secondary and higher education schools, creating a foundation for upcoming education of the Independent Lithuania (Juškienė, 2013).

In Soviet times, Catholic education was informal and was limited to underground work only. The regained independence was connected to the wide confession of faith and the freedom of Catholic education for the younger generation. At the same time, the secular worldview was becoming more prevalent, in opposition to which Catholic parents showed the initiative to raise children not following the scientism (Subačius, 2015) and the "paradigm of liberalism" (Crittenden, 2012). This way Catholic schools or Catholic minded educational institutions once more became an alternative to mainstream education.

Currently, non-governmental Catholic schools are known for the Christian expression of their culture and ever more apparent elitism (Merkys et al., 2019). However, governmental Catholic schools, established by two parties (the Catholic organisation and the municipality), avoid elitism since they usually do not have pupil selection.

## ALTERNATIVE CATHOLIC EDUCATION AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR AN EXCEPTION

During the time of educational reforms in Lithuania, some schools chose Catholic education as their model, yet not because it was a decision of the whole community of the institution to follow the Christian educational way; it was the only legal way not to follow certain requirements or to have a ground for changing the educational content. If a school could wisely "reorient" itself into a Catholic education institution, they were allowed not to be divided into different age groups, but remain "prolonged secondary schools, comprising of grades 1-12" (Merkys et al., 2019, p. 50). Some schools took advantage of this flaw and became Catholic in a blink of an eye.

Other schools, established after the regaining of independence and not deeply rooted in the Catholic education, chose the Catholic way because of the lack of such openness of institutions (Targamadžė, 2016) and/or due to the already mentioned elitist halo created throughout history (Gervytė, 2016). Such schools took advantage by promoting Catholic values, which were popular at the time (Kanišauskas, 2014). It is known that institutions, organisations, and political movements arrange Christian values to fit the relevant situations and times (Armstrong et al., 2008). God is first, and then according to the spirit of time or even fashion, church organisations and Catholic minded political

movements rank the remaining values. This kind of schools also took over the elitist high school prerogatives – to select the most gifted. The selection criteria for those who applied and were not accepted remain unknown. It is worth mentioning a sentence at the end of the list of criteria by one of the Catholic schools established a decade ago. It stated that “the selection committee after the interview reserves the right to not accept the candidate into the school, despite the points collected throughout the competition” (School of St. Joseph Student Admission Procedure, 2019).

Hence, the new non-governmental Catholic schools rightly note the drawbacks of the current education and try to fix them (Šalkauskienė, 2012). At the same time, the new Catholic schools get funding from the government and require additional payment for education. Certainly, the National Matura Exams are the time of the real challenge for the newly established and not yet mature Catholic schools. The results of these exams blow the elitist cloud from the school since the declared Christian values have no influence on the school rankings (Targamadžė & Žibėnienė, 2018).

Schools that chose to become Catholic for the exceptional opportunity to choose their students are not that bright on the research of Christian culture either. “On the scales that show whether there are signs of the atmosphere of sensitivity or solidarity, the psychological comfort of the pupils, their willingness to be in that school, or the signs of physical aggression or bullying, accidents of theft, disappearance of things, etc.” (Merkys et al., 2019). The sudden change of the core values of the school to Catholic may only be declarative in form, in hopes that such a change of educational model will preserve the model of the current school. Just as well, the radical alternatives of the newly established Catholic schools are more reminiscent of the communication campaign that not only popularises the school but also helps its marketing

## CATHOLIC EDUCATION FEATURES

Christian anthropology is the core foundation for the culture and education in whole Europe (including Lithuania) (Hefner, 1998). That is why the school of the 21st century looks at the person, their education and life from the Christian anthropological perspective. Here comes the difficulty in distinguishing specific Catholic educational philosophy signs in Lithuanian schools; however, one can notice some specific traits of Catholic education and Christian culture that are notable only in Catholic schools:

- the extent of religious education (more classes of religion and its integration into other subjects);
- special spiritual practices (retreats, spiritual disciplines, talks, listening, advice, guidance);
- liturgical practices (celebration of sacraments and prayers);
- the practice of the works of mercy (volunteering-serving the weaker, merciful acceptance).

It was noted that the above-mentioned features specific to Catholic schools can be a part of the cultural identity of other educational institutions (e.g. volunteering). That is natural since the Catholic education in history and practice is the core of the Lithuanian (and European) educational process.

When the signs of specific Christian culture and liturgical practices are being considered, and not the general content of education that is applied to all schools in Lithuania, it is worth analysing the specific experiences of the graduates of Catholic schools and high schools.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The empirical research employs the hermeneutic phenomenology approach proposed by Max van Manen (2016a) and Linda Finlay (2009). During the research, hermeneutical phenomenology was used as the theoretical and methodological core. Practical phenomenology takes the research notion of the modern hermeneutics that there are no strict rules in the research (Giorgi, 2007). Finlay (2009) states that the nature of the phenomenon and its meaning is revealed when concentrating on the experiences; when it is perceived the way the speaker saw it.

There were several steps to this research: detailed preparation for the research (focusing on its quality), selection of participants, recording of the interviews, which is followed by transcribing the recorded interviews, writing short stories, and defining the existential topics. The stories were developed using excerpts from the narratives of other participants in this research when it was necessary for the improvement of the topic analysed.

The selection of the participants took place following these criteria:

- they graduated a Catholic school or a high school in Lithuania;
- they do not have any obligations to the school they visited at that moment;

The research involved 5 participants. The participants were asked to answer the main question: Could you please share a memory of when you studied in a Catholic school? Tell me, what was happening at the moment, what you were talking about, what others talked about or did.

The way the main argument (question) was constructed allowed the interview to be authentic and akin to free storytelling. While sharing their experiences, the participants were not led to any sensible result. Looking back at the necessity of closure and reduction would eventually allow the participant to share all the details.

The data collected during the interviews were turned into a source of short stories. A story has to be concise and represent the gist of the transcribed text as well as the experience and the message (van Manen, 2016b). As stated by Max van Manen (1984), there are a few existentials, or characteristics of all phenomena: lived relation, lived time, lived space, lived body. These features are the focus of this empirical research.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### **The Sacred Areas in School – A Little Room**

The graduates of Catholic schools and high schools, when talking about their experience learning in such schools, talked about an exceptional room in the Catholic school – the chapel. This is the first memory of the graduates.

That little room. We would all go there in the mornings – teachers and children. Only those who wanted, it was not mandatory. My mom (the headmaster of the school) went there. We would go there with my sister. Still, it was cosy in there; that was the beginning. You would plug in, like into a socket. You put the wire in and then you live that day. There were only a few of us. A few children, more adults; but it was a strengthening moment of the day. When you start the day with the prayer. With the nuns.

I have been there several times and all alone. Sometimes during the breaks or after classes. When something hard, a challenge would come up. The presence of that little room was really cool. Afterwards, when the convent building was added, the little room was gone; instead, we had a chapel. It was harder to enter the chapel. It was meant for celebratory Masses, we could all fit in there. At other times the room would be locked, and you could not just come there. You must knock and agree on a certain time. It was kind of sad because the previous prayer room was so open. You could come there whenever. You would go there for a moment, and that made you stronger (Agnietè).

Agnietè talks about a small prayer room, a space everyone could enter. She remembers a cosy morning experience. Agnietè compares it to “plugging into a socket,” for the new day to be started with prayer. Though only a few would join the communal prayer, all members of the school were there (children, teachers, administration, nuns). The woman shares that she felt stronger afterwards. The openness of a small room is contrasted with the closeness of the chapel. The bigger space was used for celebrations. You could not “wonder” in and pray whenever you want, you would have to agree upon a time. The speaker shared with sadness that the little room where she would fight the fights and challenges or simply come over the breaks was no longer there.

The Chapel room is an exceptional feature of the Catholic school. It was the room used for communal liturgy and personal prayer. The opportunity for the personal prayer would often allow some time to calmly consider upcoming hardships and worries, and strengthen the relationship with God. The other interviewee, Ausma, reminisces:

There was a little chapel in school. The morning prayer would be held in there. There we would pray for each other; there we would learn about each other’s worries and problems. There we would ask God for help and protection. There I learned to pray with others.

Memories of Ausma, like those of Agnietè, reveal a special area where the essence of the sacral is not in the external symbols thereof (both women almost do not share the details of what the chapel looked like), but in the importance of oneness with God and others. There, not the design, size or spectacular look



of the room, a characteristic of many churches, is of high value, but the special connection; a relationship that would unite everyone in the room. Agnieté gives an interesting insight that a bigger chapel in the convent (an added building which did not belong to the school) is “locked,” and no longer serves the same function, as the “little room” at school: “it was kind of sad, for the other, our prayer room, was always open.”

### **Relationship Built on Trust or Outside Authority?**

A few participants of the research, without being encouraged, compared the relationships in regular and Catholic schools. This is how the interviewees decided to distinguish the speciality of the Catholic community.

The Catholic school gave me a [sense of] community. My friends who went to schools not in the city but in the suburbs had different stories from school. They were cruel, they would dishonour each other, they would even fight. We never had that. I remember when my classmates agreed to go bowling. I have problems with my legs, so I cannot throw the ball. The bowling alley belonged to Peter’s dad. Peter and others invited me to play as well. I came to the bowling alley, and when it was my turn to through the ball, Ignas did it for me, and I would encourage him with a chant. I was a part of the team. If you are a part of a playing team, it does not mean that you have to throw the bowling ball (Karina).

Karina discusses the relationships between classmates, which are extended outside the walls of the school. She shares the way of experiencing team spirit. Here, high importance is given to the invitation, respectful relationship, and creative perspectives to enable someone. This story reveals the practice of Catholic schools perfectly – to spread the Christian culture within the institution and beyond. For Karina, it looks like Catholicism in school is the foundation for creating a community. However, another participant in the research, Joelé, shares slightly a different experience:

I cannot remember how many people were in the classroom. It happened probably 15 years ago. In a second grade, during the break, a group of kids pushed me out through the doors, then they pushed me through the corridor, and then pushed me off the stairs. Our teacher was going upstairs, and she caught me. She was surprised that such things are happening when she leaves the classroom.

It seems like Joelé is sharing the experience of Karina’s friends from the suburbs. She shares about experiencing disrespectful behaviour and violence. She shares about a group of children who formed against her and hurt her on purpose. Though 15 years have passed since this event in the story, Joelé remembers her hard experience all throughout the interview and summarises her time spent in school saying: “The relationships with all my classmates were really poor. They would make fun of me; they even beat me up. In the upper classes teachers would not believe me, because it was a good Catholic school. They never stopped repeating that in a Catholic school, there cannot be any sign of bullying.”

The surprise expressed by the teacher (“she was really surprised”) reveals that when the teacher was in the classroom, children would not bully each other. However, the respectful behaviour came only from externally enforced behaviour. The bullying remained a prevalent topic till Joelè graduated. A question may arise, why “teachers would not believe” in Joelè stories about bullying and violence? Why would a whole group of the classmates bully one person for more than ten years? Does the statement – “there cannot be any bullying in a Catholic school – mean that children are being taught some principle ethical notion, or is the existence of such fact simply negated? If grown-ups did not believe and disregard the bullying in Joelè’s class, then this negation is a silent acceptance and acknowledgement of it.

In a different story, adults create a different relationship with their pupils; Olivija shared about such relationships with me:

We would call teachers by their names. We could never understand how in other schools teachers and other grown-ups were called by their last names. We called each other by name. I knew all students and staff at the school. Teachers and assistants talked about the source of love being God. What they said I cannot recall exactly, but now I see that we took over their actions. I remember we were in grade 7. Our class assistant, Irutè, would push Evelina’s wheelchair to the chapel for prayer, then to the classroom – for classes, and during the breaks – to the hallways or cafeteria. Once Irutè got ill and did not show up at work, so a 12 grader Greta pushed Evelina’s wheelchair to the chapel and to the classroom. After we were done with classes I came up to Evelina and asked if I could help her get in the elevator. Evelina asked: “Did anyone ask you to help me?”. I was taken aback and only could say a few words: “I want to help.” And she agreed. We spent that afternoon together outside.

Olivija’s story reveals that teenagers not only hear the important Christian lifestyle principle but also learn to live it through the example set by the grown-ups, not being lectured about it. Greta learned to help the weaker by witnessing the works of Irutè, while Olivija took over the initiative from Greta for half a day. She “want[ed] to help.” This act of help becomes a friendship, which is a two-sided meeting. Evelina accepted the help, but it was more important that Olivija was not encouraged to help others but wanted to do that herself. This step opens an opportunity for creating a relationship in which both girls could find the gift of talking with each other (they could spend the whole afternoon together).

In Olivija’s school, everyone knew each other and called by their name. A trust-based, quite horizontal relationship were created there. Teachers and assistants were called by names, and it was unusual to call them by their last names. Such an immediate relationship helps the children understand that voluntary help is not for adults only. Other children (the 12th grader) and their classmates can serve the less able ones as well. The internalisation of the values happens not through words of encouragement (“Did anyone ask you?”) but through having a suitable example to be inspired by.



Hence, the culture of the Catholic schools is formed not only by the principles said out loud (“there cannot be bullying,” “the source of love is God”) but also by the actions of every member of a community. The fact that Karina’s classmates were acting like a team is not only worded priority of the school; it was also a choice every student made (“Ignas threw the ball for me” and “Petras and others invited me as well”).

### **Accepted, Not Talked About, and Resurrected Body**

Karina has mobility issues. During the interview she remembers that when she started going to the Catholic school the greatest change was that:

People stopped looking at me all weird in school. The look in people’s eyes when I walk down a street, their staring at me really hurt me. I myself know that I have health issues, and I got used to the problems. But they would stare at me and remind me of my problems. I never felt the looks at school. That was the greatest change I experienced. Nobody stared at me at school.

This change gave Karina the opportunity to accept her body. Calm and accepting looks in school allowed the girl to be herself. She adds to it: “They would help me enter the bus on the field trips, they would carry my backpack, but that was so usual and normal that I would no longer consider my problem as such, but as a characteristic of mine.”

A characteristic is not a problem to be solved or some weirdness; it is an integral part of a person, helping them to be who they are. But sometimes it happens so that in Catholic education when talking about a person and their integral being, there is no room for questions about sexuality. If the topic is never talked about, many issues may arise in the teenage years. Agnietė shares:

Everyone in our class was so good, such obedient Christians, singers of psalms. A new student, Virginija, came to our class in eighth grade. She was from a boarding school. She would not dress modestly; she would wear jeans to school. We would stay away from her. Virginija, she was a cool one, she had some experience in life. Once she decided to write a song. She wrote the lyrics and came to me. I had been going to “Liepaitės” and played the guitar. And so she says to me: “You know something about the music, could you create a melody?” I said, “Show me the lyrics.” But bro, those words: “I feel, I hear your vagina making sounds”. My ears went numb, my whole body went numb. I thought to myself, I cannot create a melody for such a song. I was in such SHOCK!

Agnietė shares her shock when she saw the word “vagina” used in a song by her classmate; in their school, it was a topic no one talked about. The classmates would be disturbed by the way the girl dressed (“jeans”) and that she “was a cool one” and “had some experience in life.” Since she did not belong to the “good,” “obedient Christians,” or “singers of psalms,” the classmates would avoid her. When Virginija was trying to build a relationship with Agnietė (inviting her to “create a melody” for the song), the topic of sexuality threw Agnietė off; she was shaken. Such an extremely sensitive attitude towards a classmate “with some experience in life” reveals that sexuality is the

topic important only to those whom the whole class tries to avoid, while for others the “ears went numb, [the] whole body went numb” when such topics would be approached.

On the other hand, Agnietè shares that body, its limitedness, and death was a question many discussions would revolve around. The topic of death would be analysed in the light of the resurrection hope. Agnietè shares the details of the death of a disabled classmate:

She goes to Heaven, not under the ground. This is how it is with the deaths of disabled children. We experienced a few. It was sad, but it was bright at the same time. It would allow us all to be reminded of our limitedness, that we are here only for a short time and that it will end sometime. The reality becomes calm. The narcissism and the pride are diminished. It brings you back to reality. We are all made from the same batch of clay. It doesn't matter that one is in a wheelchair, and the other can go up the stairs whenever they want it.

The image of a body compared to clay everyone is made of reveals the predominant peace, the atmosphere of acceptance in school that is an integral part of reality (“the reality becomes calm”). It is possible that in this school the topic of sexuality had little or no attention at all in discussions; however, the pupils learned to be at peace and have a “strong sense of reality” with the acceptance of the limitedness of one's body.

### **School Time**

As in any regular school, in Catholic school time is being fragmented into hours for classes, and time after classes. Many Catholic schools also offer the parents to leave their children in school for the whole day. Joëlè shares:

I started going to school in my preschool year and went there up until my graduation. I would come really early, I would participate in a prayer that happened before classes start, then the classes would start, and after school, I had 15 different activities to go to. I would spend the whole day till the evening at school. Once I found a great tree near our school, so when it was warm outside, I would spend time on that tree. I would watch what is happening in the schoolyard. That was my quiet resting time.

And when it was cold outside, I would stand in a line for a nurse. It was a line of healthy people who simply wanted to talk with her. Gražina, the nurse, was a nun. She would listen to all of our problems and worries, but the line was really long, and you couldn't get in right away.

The afterschool activities would start just as the classes were done. I went to so many of them. I would meet friendly people there. Late in the evening, I would be picked up from school. My whole social life was happening at the school. However, after graduation, I never met my classmates again. I do not go to the class meetings, for I don't want to be reminded of those years.

Noelè's entire social life was happening in school. She did not have a good relationship with her classmates so she would spend all the breaks hiding from everyone in a tree. The tree seems to give the idea of being above the reality the

girl was watching; higher and further away from those who hurt her. The time before after-school activities were a time for watching, and during the activities, there was a time for socialising (“I would meet friendly people there”). These prolonged days of Noëlè lasted for 13 years (from preschool to grade 12). It is a long time to be spent in the same space, with the same classmates who make you hide. She does not even want to go back in time with her memories (“I don’t want to be reminded of those years”) and does not want to continue the relationships built in her school years (“I never met my classmates again”).

Another significant experience in school is break time. Noëlè talks about how during the cold months she would wait in a “line” at the nurse’s office. The nun would listen to the children; there were many children who wanted to share their experiences (“the line was long”). During the breaks, the nurse’s office would serve as the spiritual guidance office. The nun would not only help those who got ill or hurt but would spend all the breaks listening to the students (to their “problems and worries”).

Like Noëlè, other participants of the research would start their day with prayer. But it is worth analysing a different experience of time in Catholic education. Agnietè shares about retreats. In Catholic schools, this time was organised in such a way that pupils, and sometimes their parents, would have prayer and concentration weekends in locations built for that (for example, convents, retreat homes, campsites):

My sister and I sang in “Liepaitès”, and we were good at it. Hence, when the school would organise retreats, we would be asked to sing psalms and other hymns during the retreat. It was unexpected. We were nervous a little. But when we came to the retreat at the convent, we noticed that the weekend was so full of everything: there was prayer, there were conferences, there were talks, there were Masses, and there were evening gatherings. It seemed like we did so much in such a short time. At the end of the retreat, I realised that my voice is a gift from God. That I can worship God with this voice, and not only sing at “Liepaitès.” That was my revelation. Ever since then, my sister and I became the ones who “always” sang psalms.

The experience of Agnietè when the time in retreat stops flying by as it usually did is a well-known phenomenon. In a Christian tradition, time for retreat is also known as *kairos* (time of God, when He is working in the heart of people). During such practices, young people get to know themselves better, find new gifts in the light of God (“I can worship God with this voice,” “That was my revelation”), experience community (“evening gatherings”) and experience change through faith (“Ever since then, [we] became the one who “always” sang psalms”).

Another activity organised specifically in Catholic schools is the Holy Mass. On a regular basis, Masses take place during classes. It is natural that not everyone sees the organised liturgical time as equally valuable and needed. Some students resist the gathered mandatory celebration of liturgy:

On that day, as always before classes, we gathered in the small prayer room to say our prayers. Almost all teachers came, as did some assistants; there were only a few children. Our class teacher came to two of my classmates and said that they had to go to the headmaster. She said they were asked to come because they had not shown up in church the day before (the Mass took place during the 6th period). Both of my classmates looked at each other and started laughing. Then Pranas took his backpack and went towards the headmaster's office. Giedrius took his phone and called someone. I heard him say: "Mom, the headmaster called me in the office for that nonsense again, for not going to church. You know they will call you again."

Karina's memory reveals that the Mass time for Pranas and Giedrius became the time for repeated resistance ("for that nonsense again," "they will call you again"). Some of the students at the Catholic schools resisted the planned prayer practices and the celebration of the Masses. This activity included in the educational plan was ridiculous to them ("looked at each other and started laughing"); they also considered the time spent that way to be useless ("for that nonsense").

Similar is the experience of pupils from schools which suddenly changed their status to Catholic and some students disagree with the change. Nerijus shares one of his stories from the time of reforms:

I remember, I was standing in the classroom and the sun was shining outside. It was a spring morning. I focused and went to the elevator. While the elevator was going up, I planned the words I would say, how I will greet them, what I will say. The doors of the elevator opened, and I entered. I felt nervous when pressing the button. The doors opened again, and I was about to enter the hallway on the first floor. My steps were clumsy but fast, I was in a hurry. I knocked on the white doors of the headmaster's office; he answered, "Please, come in." I entered, nodded and sat down. The headmaster looked at me, and I was looking at him. He did not say anything, just stared at me. He heard me breathing fast. I felt the nerves. He looked straight into my eyes. And spilt it so fast: "Please add the old name of the school on my diploma. I don't want there to be a mention of a Catholic high school on it. You only changed the name this year. I want to finish a normal school".

The headmaster only nodded and looked down at the documents on the table in front of him. I took the crutches, stood up and went through the door. From the inside, it was light brown.

Nerijus shares a story that exactly represents what youth, whose school suddenly "turned" to Catholic education, experienced during the reforms. They remember the time of worry and becoming distant. Silent pressure ("looking straight into my eyes," "the headmaster only nodded"), the sense of irregularity ("I want to finish a normal school") accompanied pupils during the time of changes. Nerijus was standing in a bright classroom and courageously ventured to the headmaster's office, the door of which was two different colours on the inside and on the outside. It is as if everything inside of the school was as it was usually ("I am standing in my classroom," "it's spring again," "the sun

is shining”) but at the same time, the door to all that was closed, and opened to the change that only brings worry (“I felt the nerves”). Nerijus was trying to be a part of the “normal school” (“I was in a hurry”), trying to oppose what already had ended that year (“You only changed the name this year”). A well-known life in his school ended before his schooling was over. What he knew well, the time of the “normal school” ended early.

## THE LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

It has to be acknowledged that in times of a pandemic new limitations arise. All the interviewees of this research were interviewed using the Zoom platform. Such communication during the in-depth interviews creates short, awkward pauses, and technical issues (like the sudden loss of the Internet connection), forcing us to restart the same conversation several times. Because of this, the style and sense of the stories were diluted.

The fact that I am engaged with the Catholic Church (I am a nun and that becomes obvious from the first look at my clothes) could have limited the critical expression of their insights during the interview. Nevertheless, because of the same reason, some of the participants did not shy away from revealing the negative side of the experience in the Catholic school, and that encourages me to believe that the findings of the research are authentic and useful.

## CONCLUSIONS

Considering the historical context, Catholic education is a traditional phenomenon, having strong reappearances at different times. That is why the term “alternative,” when talking about Catholic education in Lithuania, can only be used in very specific cases: a) when Catholic education becomes a resistance movement to various repressions and worldviews opposite to the Christian culture; b) when it is useful to the school in hopes of not doing required nationwide reforms.

The answers of the participants reveal the special space of a Catholic school – the chapel. Graduates of different schools perceive the sacred value of the chapel not in its physical symbols, but through the importance of being one with God and others. Hence, not the outward looks of the room are considered important, but the relationships; the connections that would unite everyone.

The relationship based on trust between adults and children in a Catholic school encourages children to do good deeds, they see what older people (teachers and other students) and their classmates (creating team spirit and accepting interpersonal relations) do. On the other hand, ignorance and the negation of relationships among classmates may lead to secrets, decade long bullying, the pioneers of which behave well only in the presence of an authority. But once the authority (teacher) turns away, cruel behaviour that “cannot be in a Catholic school” reappears.

The experience of the body in a Catholic school is revealed in several ways: the students' voluntary physical assistance to those in need; the students' kind attitude towards classmates with disabilities; the school's ambivalent attitude towards sexuality; the students' strong hope in the resurrection of the body.

The time in a Catholic school, like in any other school, is experienced through fragmented hours for classes, breaks, or hours for classes and after school activities. The so-called *kairos* time, which takes place during the students' retreat, is identified as a special time in Catholic education. Some students find the timing of the planned liturgy meaningless. Similarly, the time of reforms when the worldview of a school changes brings a sense of distance and worry, which encourages the resistance and desire to bring the school back into the usual state of "normalcy."

Some of the exceptionally Catholic characteristics, distinguished in the article, are seen in the findings of the phenomenological research, including specific practices of spiritual guidance (retreats, listening, conversations), liturgical practices (morning prayer and Masses) and the practice of works of mercy (voluntary help to the weaker, community building, merciful acceptance). Greater experience of religious education was unnoticed in the experiences shared by the participants.

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