

# THEORETICAL REVIEW THE NATURE AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF INCLUSIVE CATHOLIC EDUCATION IN LITHUANIA

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The aim of this theoretical review is to identify the possibilities of inclusive education in a Catholic school. The review seeks to describe the ways in which such schools have already chosen to engage or not engage in compulsory inclusive education in Lithuania. It also seeks to highlight the Catholic Church's teaching on inclusion of vulnerable groups.

**Methods.** Analysis and synthesis of scientific literature. Analysis and synthesis of Catholic Church documents.

**Results.** The analysis and synthesis of the scientific literature revealed that Catholic educational institutions in Lithuania implement one of the following three ways of contact with inclusion: a) full inclusion, b) gradual involvement in the state strategy of inclusion, c) segregation of pupils at the time of admission to the school. The analysis and synthesis of Catholic Church documents has shown that the Church's teaching on the inclusion of vulnerable groups unequivocally invites, encourages and even insists that schools become open to all children and their needs.

**Conclusions.** The very nature of the Church community is inherently inclusive and has no room for discrimination; on the contrary, its weakest members should be the most lovingly protected. The development of Catholic education is bound up not only with the creators of specific educational paradigms, but also with the changes in general education in a particular context. Although concrete practices are gradually changing and showing good trends towards inclusiveness, some schools retain a strong elitist character and tend to offer aid as a form of charitable action outside the formal schooling.

**Keywords:** Catholic education, inclusion, Catholic Church teaching, inclusive education

## INTRODUCTION

September 2024 marks the start of the year of inclusive education in schools in Lithuania. This change has sparked much discussion and debate, not only in public schools but also in non-state Catholic schools. Some of them have been integrating children with special needs or disabilities in one way or another for several decades. As integrated education has gradually evolved into inclusive education, the approach to educating children has also changed. Other schools have all along avoided dealing with the inclusion of children with special needs, selecting and educating only those pupils who are suitable for the school. Yet another part of Catholic schools will now have the opportunity to try inclusive education alongside state schools. In the following part of the text, I would like to give an overview of the process and the possibilities of Catholic inclusive education in Lithuania.

Inclusive Catholic education began to be explored at the beginning of the 21st century, when there was a return to the idea that Catholic education should be more open to every child (Cattaro, 2021). Gradually, the discussion of the accessibility of Catholic education authors has turned into a discussion of the possibility of social services for persons with disabilities (DeFiore, 2006). Along with the shift towards inclusion in society, the position of the Catholic school is also changing, so that researchers in Catholic education are becoming more vocal about the moral obligation to change the established education into an inclusive one (Long & Schuttloffel, 2006), but these scholarly discussions are more like a conversation about a compulsory subject, but less concerned with the phenomenon of the school's change. It is true that as the change has gathered momentum, a growing number of scholars studying Catholic inclusive education have offered guidelines and recommendations for implementing this change (Jez et al., 2021). Comparative studies of Catholic and non-Catholic inclusive institutions have been conducted (Donlevy, 2007; Imbarack & Guzman, 2021), discourse (Booth & Ainscoe, 2001) and ethnographic studies (Bradley-Levine, 2021; Wagner, 2021). However, deeper research that reveals the inclusive nature of becoming a Catholic educational institution is lacking.

Researchers have analysed students' experiences of inclusive Catholic education more through the phenomenon of the coexistence of different religious traditions in school (Foley et al., 2020). There is interest in the experiences of non-religious pupils in Catholic schools (Arandia et al., 2019; Boeve, 2019), and there is a deepening interest in the expression of pupils in Catholic schools through social activities, such as service to the poor (Wodon, 2019).

## INCLUSION IN THE TEACHING OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The teaching of the Catholic Church functions is a recall, interpretation, inculturation, and actualisation of the Gospel message. Consequently, we will not find anything new in the teaching that is not found in Scripture and the Tradition of the Church. However, the cultures of the time of the proclamation of the Gospel and the third decade of the 21st century are different. Therefore, each generation must rediscover and concretely implement the principles of the Gospel in the context of its society. In the same way, we can rediscover the Tradition of the Church in the present perspective. For example, certain ideas of Thomas Aquinas are interpreted by contemporary authors as the beginnings of an inclusive approach to society and education (Carlson, 2014). However, full inclusion is a construct emerging between the 20th century and the second decade of the 21st century, which, seems to have nothing new to offer to the Christian view of human rights, dignity, and worth.

The modern understanding of inclusion in Church teaching is gradually being clarified, sometimes lost and forgotten. But the idea is gradually being revisited, first when the teaching on social justice in the Church was recalled and detailed at the end of the 19th century. Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 seeks, on behalf of the whole Communion, to identify and defend human rights. This is the first time that the issue of social justice has been so clearly addressed. This encyclical becomes an example of a "grounded" or socially embodied Gospel, which has encouraged Christians not only to actively discuss the topic of social justice but also to engage in the search for concrete solutions (Sasiadek, 2011). In the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council opened up the Church to the world and invited it to commit itself to collaborate in social justice by noticing and responding to the needs of the vulnerable (Still & Rompré, 2018). Subsequent documents (going back to the present time) that spoke on the theme of social justice echoed and expanded on the ideas of *Rerum Novarum* and the Second Vatican Council, with an increasingly explicit intercession for the most vulnerable members and groups of society (Massaro, 2015).

Of course, the Church's new role in the world has unfolded slowly, and in parallel, the wounds of abuse of authority by some members of the community have been spreading, one after another. This has weakened confidence in the credibility of the principles of life in this global community. On the one hand, the Church has been increasingly vocal in representing the weak: so that, in the end, the perception of the "other" will no longer exist, but only of "us" (Francesco, 2020). The Church not only tries to speak with the voice of all the vulnerable but also to create concrete structures to save the lives of the marginalised (e.g. Mother Teresa and others) (Morariu, 2020). On the other hand, the Community has been plagued by scandals of abuse of authority and exploitation of little ones (Rashid & Barron, 2019).

Gradually, the Church has come to a crossroads where it has to decide which way to go: (a) to close itself in its righteousness, to reinforce the hierarchy's position in politics, and to try to regain the power and influence it has lost in the crisis, or (b) to become a vulnerable, fragile community of the little ones (the small among the small), humbly repenting of the errors of its members. Pope Francis calls for the Church to take the second path, to become a "field hospital" (Cavanaugh, 2016), where there is no longer a distinction between one's own and one's enemies, where everyone is welcomed and healed, with the clear understanding that the community itself is wounded and in need of divine healing. Such a Community is a practice of daily inclusion. The educational institution of such a community could become open to all children.

## INCLUSIVE CATHOLIC EDUCATION

Catholic education institutions around the world share the same characteristics: (a) the education meets the requirements of the country's particular education system, and (b) the school operates according to the guidelines and principles of the Catholic education paradigm.

Catholic education has deep historical roots (Bowen, 2013) and different streams of tradition, which in one way or another are associated with different educators and founders of spiritual schools. The charisma of these individuals and the sound principles of educating children and young people remain relevant as the generations change. Jesuit education is quite well known, and there is also a wide global presence of Assumptionist, Salesian, and other traditions of Catholic education (Grace, 2002). It would therefore be difficult to describe Catholic education concisely, in a few words, because each tradition seeks to highlight and preserve the distinctiveness of the educational tradition bequeathed by its founder. Of course, each generation discovers a contemporary expression of the tradition handed down. The documents of the Catholic Church which regulate Catholic education, recommend and sometimes oblige Catholic educational institutions throughout the world to adhere to the guidelines outlined therein.

As for the shift towards inclusion, Catholic educational institutions do not have specific guidance from the Church. Perhaps schools and other educational institutions are bound by the Church's teaching on social justice? Or is it because inclusion itself is in line with the commandment of Christian charity and does not need to be repeated in a chapter? However, if we look at the history of Catholic schools (Cashin, 2004), we can see the exclusion of people affected by disability, and poverty, as well as of other ethnic groups, other religions, and all the "others". On the one hand, the Church cares for the poor, the sick as well as children and young people in poverty and exploitative practices (Fierro Torres, 1949). Catholic education, on the other hand, remains the prerogative of the rich and the gifted, as it has for the past century (Glenn, 1989). This is evidenced by a broader study of Catholic schools in Western countries, which clearly shows that

it is Catholic schools that select the more gifted students from economically successful families (West & Woessmann, 2010). Perhaps this is why Catholic education is only gradually converging with educational institutions around the world on the path of inclusion. This means that the development of Catholic education is increasingly sensitive to the dignity of each person and the valuable and desirable participation of vulnerable groups.

Alongside the global shift towards inclusivity, we observe a unanimity of Catholic educationalists that Catholic education should be inclusive in itself (Gould & Vaughn, 2000; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012 and others). Alongside this perception, educational practices are changing (in the USA, Canada, and elsewhere): starting with the inclusion of children with special educational needs, educational institutions are opening up to those of different faiths, non-believers, migrants, and people with physical disabilities (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016; Donlevy, 2007). Separate school missions are emerging that include the education of street children and youth (Gutiérrez, 2007), and minors affected by addiction and abuse (Adhiambo, 2019). The Catholic school thus moves out of comfortable clarity and into the margins.

The change described above is a concrete implementation of the teaching of the Catholic Church, a spreading of love that welcomes all. It is important to note, however, that such an all-encompassing college is made up of a synthesis of studies from different Catholic schools. This means that few Catholic schools will be able to provide a quality education for all the children of all the vulnerable groups on their horizon. The trend toward inclusive Catholic education is a good one, but each school unit is still in the process of becoming inclusive. This insight is also important because there are schools that accept all but one particularly vulnerable group. Such discrimination and segregation of a single group is particularly painful for children and young people from that group (Bayly, 2013).

## INCLUSIVE CATHOLIC EDUCATION IN LITHUANIA

Catholic education in Lithuania is the most profound tradition and the main current that has shaped the direction of the restoration of independence of Lithuania. It is understandable that Catholic gymnasiums, which tend to be elitist and select their pupils, are not in the field of inclusion, and it is therefore only necessary to point out that these institutions simply segregate their pupils, and that Catholic education there means more the rather superficial moral principles of a closed system than the Gospel of life.

If Pope Francis' metaphor of the Church as a "field hospital" encompasses all the people of the outside world and their hardships, then the selection of Catholic kindergartens, schools, and other educational institutions represents the above-mentioned path chosen by a rather closed community. Understandably, some Catholic institutions of higher education admit their members through wise and appropriate selection (e.g. seminaries) to prepare suitable persons for future service. If such persons

were previously graduates of segregating Catholic kindergartens and gymnasiums, it may be the case that a person has been educated in a Catholic culture that is opposed to inclusiveness, from early childhood until the time of graduation. Such a culture and its tradition produce a person who knows how to give alms to the poor or the sick, but it remains an open question whether this person will be willing and able to build a community or a society that is open to all? Or is the social sensitivity of the Catholic thus educated limited to pity and the hope of encountering as little as possible of the “other”? The choices at the crossroads of the Church thus lead in different directions, and these choices are reflected in the gulf between elite Catholic education and inclusive education.

On the other hand, the first integrated school in independent Lithuania was Catholic. Vilnius „Versmės“ (since 2018 – „Blessed Teofilias Matulionis Gymnasium“) was founded in 1993. The aim of the school is to integrate pupils with special educational needs into mainstream education. In 2010, it became a non-state Catholic school (the Congregation of the Sisters of the Assumption of Mary became a co-founder of the school) (Gervytė, 2019). In 2015, “Versmės“ school expanded the range of admissions of vulnerable groups, accepting not only children with disabilities/special needs but also refugee children (Gervytė, 2019, p. 108). Gradually, the school moved from an inclusive school model through an assumptionist (Catholic) education to an inclusive one before Lithuanian education started to plan for the implementation of the „Universal design for learning model“. It is important to note that the origins and cradle of this design was the „Versmės“ school (Galkienė, 2003). It is this school that does not have the elements of the elements that are resistant to inclusion and therefore combines the quality of education through the pursuit of results with the principles of inclusive learning. This school is therefore the furthest along in the evolution of inclusive education in Lithuania.

However, when summarising the data from the study of other Catholic schools, it is evident that inclusion is understood as a distinct practice, encompassing specific activities, but not the whole school’s way of life and culture. For example, from time to time “visiting orphanages, day centres for children with disabilities” (Juškienė, 2012, p. 9). In the same way Catholic schools that do not select their pupils also show tendencies that are common to other educational institutions in Lithuania: inclusive education is formally implemented, but it has no continuity in practice. A few children with disabilities or other special needs are admitted to classes, but they do not experience full participation and personal success (Targamadze & Gervytė, 2014).

## CONCLUSIONS

The very nature of the Church community is inherently inclusive and has no room for discrimination; on the contrary, its weakest members should be the most lovingly

protected. Such an ideal project seems difficult to realise in reality, since the faults and errors of every society are also the consequences of the actions of Christians within that society. The Church's teaching is therefore a recurrent echo of the Gospel, reminding each new generation of Christians of the irrevocable commitment of the Community to the little ones.

The development of Catholic education is bound up not only with the creators of specific educational paradigms, but also with the changes in general education in a particular context. By its spirit, the Catholic school is sensitive to the most vulnerable groups of children and is open to the education of the disadvantaged, but in practice this intrinsic reality has been only partially manifested. Although concrete practices are gradually changing and showing good trends towards inclusiveness, some schools retain a strong elitist character and tend to offer aid as a form of charitable action outside the formal schooling. The inclusive community model is understood as helping 'others' but not identifying with them.

Inclusive education in Lithuania first began in the Catholic Versmės School and today this school has a compelling educational experience that could be transferred to the currently changing and inclusive education system across the country. Other Catholic schools are moving in two directions: (a) following the national model of inclusive education and taking on the challenges of resistance and poor preparation that this entails; (b) (Catholic grammar schools) are selecting their pupils and thereby avoiding the implementation of the generally agreed inclusive education principles.

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