

The Church in the School

Alin BOLBOAȘĂ ȘOFARU

University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract: *The research I want to present is based on a survey conducted in 2013, when I started as a teacher at “Mediensis” Technical College, in Mediaș. Near the Christmas time, I challenged the students to write a letter to God to express reasons they would give Christ to be born or not to be born in that year. Initially, I intended to have a better knowledge about their thinking concerning the personal relationship we need to have with Christ, but I learned that over 73% of the students had one or both parents working abroad, being home alone or left to the care of relatives or neighbors. The percentage surprised me and determined me to start a project that would develop the interpersonal relationships, offer them the confidence that God is always with them and especially, keep them close to school. The “St. Hierarch Andrei Șaguna Chapel”, the students' masterpiece contributed to the development and improvement of personal skills in the religious practice. The students were helped not just to discover their spiritual identity, to practice corporate prayer, but also to enhance their talents, abilities and to develop new cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills. The purpose was both, an educational and a religious one, looking to transform a simple classroom into a church according to the real canons, developing joy, respect for holy things, active involvement in the church in the lives of the participants.*

Keywords: students, church, school, education, classroom.

Introduction

Nowadays there is a constant dissatisfaction from the youth engaged in the learning process about the fact that there is too much emphasis on the theoretical part in the detriment of the practical aspect, that studying does not relate enough to life. And, unfortunately, such an aspect may be true. For this reason, there have been recent attempts to re-establish the connection between theory and experience in life, highlighting the holistic character of the educational process, which starts in school, but which continues in daily life.¹ It is clear that in the postmodern world the moral exigencies collapsed and the family went into crisis. The crisis has its spiritual causes, but other negative factors also hit the family: poverty, unemployment, proselytizing sects, violence, uncertainty of tomorrow, emigration to richer countries.² Educational models promoting ethical and moral values can be identified in biblical writings (the pedagogical model of Jesus, the love preached by the Gospel and reflected in

¹ Benedict Vesa, “Education and experience – the itinerary from text to context. A theological perspective,” in I. Albulescu, A.D.Manea, I.M.Morariu (eds.), *Education, Religion, Family in the contemporary society*, Saarbrücken, Lambert Academic Publishing, 2017, p. 89.

² A. Andreicuț, “Familia, copiii și tinerii, educarea lor și viitorul omenirii,” in I. Albulescu, A. D. Manea, I. M. Morariu (eds.), *Education, Religion, Family in the contemporary society*, Saarbrücken, Lambert Academic Publishing, 2017, p.9

public life,³ literary texts (classic, modern, futuristic - novels, poetry, prose, novels), sources / documents and historical sources (legends, stories, myths, epistles and letters) cinema, heroes of social, cultural, sports and technology.⁴ We believe that success in building a functioning society capable of managing and harnessing the ethnic, racial or religious differences between its members is to a great extent dependent on the capacity of society in general and educational policies to specifically ensure the complementarity of formal dimensions, non-formal and informal.⁵

The technical colleges in Romania are high schools that have been founded to replace the vocational schools. A part of them are attended by students with poor educational results, students with a very delicate family situation, from the rural area, who had not perform well at the middle school capacity exam. These students score grades even of 1.50 or 1.75 out of 10. Here it's where the school dropout rate goes of charts.

In the book "*Psihologie Umanistă*" by Camelia Airinei I've found the following quote: "*Written communication implies mastering specific skills such as accurate language use, clear expression, logical arguments, note taking, text editing and resuming. Usually, writing a text requires a preparation phase and the actual writing of the text*". With this in mind, right before the Christmas holiday, I've decided to help them understand the importance of written communication and gave them a task to write a letter to God through which they were required to provide Him with arguments and reasons whether or not He should come to birth on the earth in that specific year.

The letters were extremely profound, many of them being published in the last few years, but they even helped me to find the main problem, at least in that school, although it's a national one, that 73% of those students have one or both parents working abroad, being left to be taken care of by some relatives (60%), neighbors (27%) or even alone (13%) during the school year.⁶ In conclusion, those students were not supervised besides school classes and did not receive the necessary attention, which led to a high number of absences, some of them even dropping out of school, worsening their educational situation. Knowing the fact that the formation and development of the moral, relational-value dimension of human personality is one of the priorities of most contemporary educational systems, we consider that an exemplary mobilization of human and material resources in the various educational institutions is required towards ensuring efficient moral education determined not only by

³ Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "An Orthodox Perspective on Political Theology", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, XVII (2018), no. 49, p. 156.

⁴ Adriana Denisa Manea, "Features of Educational Activities in the Contemporary Society", in *Astra Salvensis*, VI (2018), no. 12, p. 255-260.

⁵ C. Stan, A. D. Manea, "The Dimensions of Intercultural Education", in *Astra Salvensis*, VI (2018), no. 12, p. 291-297.

⁶ A. Bolboacă Șofaru, M. Jaga, *Serisori către Dumnezeu*, Iași, 2018.

analyzing the characteristics and problems of contemporary society, but also by the data history provides, especially since the decline of a society can start once it is incapable to manage and perpetuate traditions, values and culture.⁷

National Project “St. Hierarch Andrei Șaguna Chapel”

Building a Chapel in the “Mediensis” Technical College, Mediaș produced a major spiritual impact in the students’ hearts and drew them close to God. The project “St. Hierarch Andrei Șaguna Chapel” contributed to the development and improvement of personal religious skills. Having the opportunity to learn the mysteries of the Holy Bible through practical involvement, under the supervision of a specialized professor, the students were helped not only to discover their spiritual identity, to practice corporate prayer, to value their talents and abilities, to enhance their cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills, but also to stop dropping out of school. The painting and decorating of “*St. Hierarh Andrei Șaguna*” chapel created a bridge between the institutional framework and the real Christian life.

The purpose of the project was both, an educational and a religious one, with the aim of transforming a normal classroom in a church, according to the actual canons, developing in the students the joy of spending time with God, the respect for the holy things and active involvement in the Church’s life. The painting of the walls of the classroom dedicated for religious studies transposed the students into the churchly universe, offering a new dimension for the classroom, a new mood – ”I go in the classroom to pray”, ”I go in the classroom to write my homework”.

The larger objective was to develop the artistic side and the respect for divinity amongst my students, by creating new skills, attitudes and aptitudes of religious nature. The whole didactic approach was aimed to reveal the value of the iconographic painting in its ecclesiastical specificity, to help students to spend as much time in school as possible and to eradicate school abandonment.

As specific objectives we had the collection, analysis and implementation of religious information, the planning of the construction of a chapel, the application of the canons specific to the church painting, the development and improvement of social skills (teamwork, responsibility), the development and improvement of personal skills (initiative, creativity, generosity, respect for the holy assets).

Initially, the project was designed to run over during the school year of 2013-2014, from October, 1st to May, 30th. Weekly, students were working on the Chapel “St. Hierarch Andrei Șaguna” for 4 hours (starting at 2 PM each day), the total amount of hours allocated for the project being 620. Although the construction and painting were ready within the planned timeframe, we

⁷ A. D. Manea, “Influences of religious education on the formation moral consciousness of students”, in *Procedia -Social and Behavioral Sciences*, CIL (2014), p. 518-523.

continued the project during the following three years, as long as I worked as teacher in that high school.

Before presenting the activities, I must mention the profiles of "Mediensis" Technical College classes, in order to understand why there was a need for section involvement during the construction phase:

A – "Computing operator technician"

B – "Drawing technician for construction and installation"

C – "Technician in economic activities"

D – "Trade seller"

E – "Aesthetics and hygiene of the human body"

F – "Fashion design"

Preparing and starting the project "St. Hierarch Andrei Şaguna Chapel" required many different activities, first of them being the understanding of the role of icons in the church, the symbolism of the church's component parts, the relationship between the scenes to be painted and the events of the Scripture and basic traits of Byzantine painting.

During this activity the students, alongside their professor, searched for the materials, canons about church painting and visited different churches in town, in order to understand the importance of a liturgical room in school.

After studying the aforementioned, a classroom was set up for the building of the Chapel, being followed by the sizing and sectioning of the room, the sketching of the icons and the study of the painting techniques. The students began rehabilitating a former tea room from the dorm, which was no longer used for the main role, by removing the lime from the walls, applying plaster coat and painting it with washable, laying the groundwork for the religious paintings. This section involved especially the students from classes IX-XII B concerning the construction part and from classes IX – XII C for the financial management and materials shopping.⁸

Having the classroom ready, the painting started with Royal Icons in the front around the blackboard, the biblical scenes concerning the Birth of Jesus Christ, the Baptism of Jesus Christ, the Entrance of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, the Crucifixion and Resurrection of the Lord, finishing with the Pantocrator icon on the ceiling. Here, all the students of the high school were involved, each contributing either to the painting as a whole, or with the support offered to the painters. As addition, was the writing of biblical verses, patristic and secular texts on the enclosure provided by one of the walls of the room, the students motivating that those texts are necessary for each generation⁹.

The next phase was developed by the students themselves, although it wasn't mentioned in the initial plan. Students from grade IX – XII A electrified

⁸ Figure 1 – The preparation of the room for the painting.

⁹ Figure 2 – The painting of the classroom.

the candles and the candlesticks and mounted them, being helped by their professor, in front of the Royal icons, beside the biblical scenes¹⁰.

The penultimate phase was the „aestetization” of the Chapel, if we can call it so, which implied the total involvement of the students from IX – XII E and F classes, who chose to buy the curtains to match the predominant colours of the painting, the furniture, of the Chapel required that all students from classes IX – XII E and F which chose to buy curtains in the same colors as the paintings, all the furniture, reconditioned old traditional costumes that displayed alongside the priestly garments received as donation. The same students were in charge with the floral arrangements, brought to the Chapel from a floral store from the town¹¹.

The final phase, the sanctifying of the Chapel, although it was prepared through the invitation of IPS Ph. Laurențiu Streza, the Metropolitan of Transylvania, who gave his blessing in the beginning of the project, the preparation of the school’s choir in order to give biblical answers during the Liturgy and the desire that all students wear traditional clothing in that day, was abandoned by the directorate of the school as a reason for not being able to sustain such activity. The sanctifying of the Chapel took place, during the weekend, in a small group with a monk and nuns from the local monastery.

The results of the project surpassed any personal expectation: the involvement of over 500 students in the construction and painting of “St. Hierarch Andrei Șaguna” Chapel, offering to each student the opportunity to participate in the construction and painting of a small church, increasing the interests of students in attending theological universities, with the further perspective of integration in the religious life.

Alongside this, the rates of absentism and dropouts decreased, the involvement of parents, of officials and mass media in the end product together with knowledge about the specifics of Byzantine painting, the manifestation of feelings of appreciation towards the ending phase. The students demonstrated the ability of working a team, reflection, skills of argumentation, and as a panoramic result, we had an improvement of school performance due to attendance at classes and especially to the exchange of ideas and the help of those students who performed well in school, help offered after the time scheduled for the Chapel work.

¹⁰ Figure 3 – The candles and the candlesticks.

¹¹ Figure 4 – The aesthetic side of the Chapel.

Figure 1 – The preparation of the room for the painting



Figure 2. The painting of the classroom



Figure 3 The candles and the candlesticks

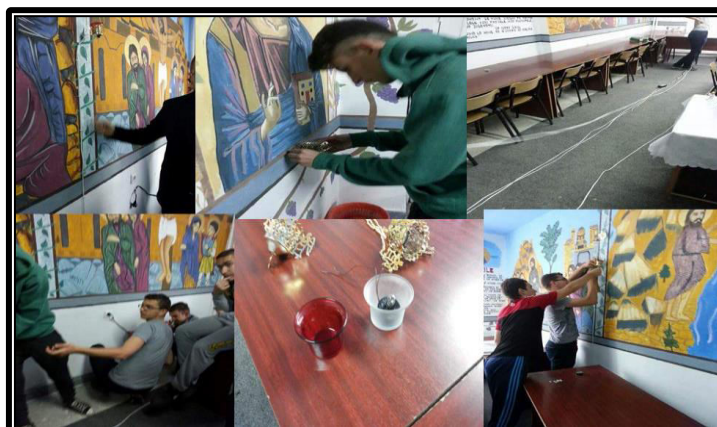


Figure 4



The aesthetic side of the Chapel



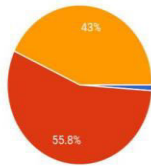
Figure 5 The panoramic view of the Chapel

I applied this questionnaire to a sample of 150 students and this is what the results say:

More than 80% of the participants say there is a need for a special placeto be arranged for prayers in schools and that 70% of them would go there whenever they had the opportunity.Over 80% believe that a special place for prayer in school can change something in their attitude toward the Church. Approximately 50% consider that their involvement in a similar project would get them closer to God and would rise their interest in Religion and over 50% would decide to get involved just because they feel like doing so.

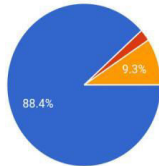
Appendix 1

Why have you decided to get involved in the construction and the decoration of The Church?



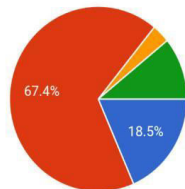
I was forced	1	1.2%
Because this is how I felt	48	55.8%
I thought that this was a great idea and I decided to get involved	37	43%
I wanted to show of	0	0%

Do you think that the existence of the Church in the school area changed something in your attitude?



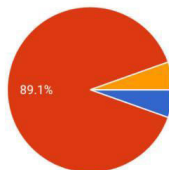
Yes, because I saw that place as something special where I felt very good	76	88.4%
No	2	2.3%
I haven't noticed any differences	8	9.3%

How often do you visit The Church of The Holy Hierarch Andrei Saguna from the school area?



Only when I attend to the religion class	17	18.5%
Every time I get the chance	62	67.4%
Few times a day	3	3.3%
Few times a week	10	10.9%

Do you think that there should be arranged a special space for praying in schools?



No, because I believe this is a doctrine	7	5.4%
Yes, because the students need a space where they can learn about their religion and fortify their fate	115	89.1%
The school and the church should be 2 individual institutions	7	5.4%

Conclusions

Religious education is essential in promoting a moderate and tolerant expression of one's own identity, a dialogue based on respect for human dignity. In fact, religious denominations and religious actors have a very wide public visibility and, above all, an essential role in influencing large categories of population.¹²

In a contemporary society characterized by the erosion of fundamental values, the over sizing of individualism and economic-financial values, there is required a serious investigation on some of the most important value foundations of (Western) culture that have lost their power, influence and effectiveness.¹³

¹² V.Timiș, “Diseminarea valorilor religioase prin intermediul activităților catehtice,” in *Astra Salvensis*, V(2017), no.6, p.29

¹³ G. Albu, V .Cojocariu, “Teachers – at the turn of times,” in *Astra Salvensis*, VI (2018), no. 12, p. 281-287.

"The Church in the School," *Astra Salvensis*, VII (2019), no. 14, p. 237-245