

Hearing Freedom of Education European Parliament – Jan. 2017

- The European Committee for Catholic Education, which is a more than forty years old international non-profit association, is the cooperation tool for 29 national or regional Catholic education secretariats in 27 Central, Eastern and Western European countries. It represents more than 8 500 000 pupils, and 35 000 schools. That represents millions of parents, families.
- One of the aims of the association is *“to actively promote the effective carrying into practice of Freedom of Education as a fundamental condition for the functioning of a democratic society, in conformity with the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and with the additional Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights”*.
- Freedom of education has thus always been one of our focus areas. The CEEC especially tries to promote, in all its member countries, the effective carrying into practice of this freedom, and sometimes directly supports members in their negotiations with their government.
- To check the current situation of this value, the CEEC launched a survey concerning the *“Autonomy of Catholic Education in Europe”*, in September 2015. At this moment, 21 member countries have answered to this survey.
- There were four questions: Only three of them interest us for our hearing today:
 1. What is the general autonomy of Catholic Education in Europe? What can it decide on its own?
 2. What funding is granted to Catholic Education in Europe?
 3. What is the place of religious education class in Europe?
 4. Are there conflicts, areas of tension, in Europe concerning Catholic Education?
- We give as definition of Autonomy: *“Situation of a community, a public body with powers and institutions enabling them to manage their own affairs, without interference from the central government”*.
- Because it’s a work in progress not yet finished, I will give hereunder only a brief and uncompleted overview of some results. We have noticed that freedom of education can be exercised in many European countries:
 - 6 of 21 countries mention a large autonomy in general,
 - 11 of 21 mention freedom at the level of teacher recruitment,
 - 4 of 21 mention freedom about establishing programmes,
 - 12 of 21 say they have to comply with official programmes.

- However, the way in which the State funds schools varies a lot. There are three different situations:
 - Catholic education does not get any funding (4 of 21): in these countries, the contribution of parents is often asked as additional or total resource to the funding of the school. Can we speak about freedom of education in accordance with the European texts when the State does not support the schools which it not directly organises?
 - Catholic Education gets partial funding (12 of 21). There are several kinds of situation: unequal funding between pupils in State schools and pupils in Catholic schools ; no funding for infrastructure (buildings) or working costs of Catholic schools ; sometimes the salary of teachers in Catholic schools is only partially covered.
 - Catholic education gets total funding (5 of 21).
- We can observe that these differences in treatment in several countries show the determination to limit the number of Catholic / private schools and the number of pupils in these schools.
- Furthermore, in a number of countries, the association contracts between private education and State are often modified, questioned, or even denied. Today, the example of Portugal is particularly striking: the government has unilaterally decided to break, before the end, the three-year contract that linked private schools and the State, modifying significantly the mode of funding of the classes in these schools. That leads to many problems for welcoming children, but also at financial and legal levels.
- In some countries, private education still often appears like an unsupportable competition to what is considered a State monopoly.
- About religion :
 - The class of religious education is a compulsory element of the program of Catholic Education (12 of 21),
 - The class of religious education is an optional element of the program of Catholic Education (6 of 21),
 - The class of religious education is forbidden_(2 of 21).
 Convinced that the religious education is one of the best way to let's grow tolerance and pluralism, we have to promote the freedom of such education.

- Finally, it happens that freedom of education leads to tensions or even conflicts between the structures of Catholic education and the State :
 - This is the case for 9 of 21 countries. Such tensions or conflicts are often related to funding conditions.
 - 7 of 21 countries say there is no tension or conflict between Catholic education and the State.

- We conclude, as it is mentioned in international texts, more than ever, the states should work positively for the implementation of the right of education. In this regard, the state is obliged to take measures to enable that school choice becomes a real school choice for all. It is clear that a state that tolerates school choice without implementing means to guarantee this right cannot be considered as a country that respects freedom of education!

Guy SELDERSLAGH
Secretary General CEEC
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