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## Poland: Bishops, “firm disapproval of the reform of religious education”

The Polish Bishops express “firm disapproval of the changes made in the school syllabus, aimed at reducing the teaching of the catechesis to just one hour a week and bringing together different classes of students during the hours of religious education”, as declared in a Statement signed by mgr. Wojciech Osial, president of the Commission for Catholic Education of the Polish Episcopal Conference, issued on Tuesday, 18<sup>th</sup> June, after the statements made by Barbara Nowacka, Minister of Education in Donald Tusk’s government. The reform previewed by Nowacka, which is expected to be enforced at the start of the next academic year (in Poland, it is 1<sup>st</sup> September) because of the increasingly low number of students attending lessons of catechesis (which were started 30 years ago in schools of all ranks and levels), also entails the obligation to plan the hour of religion as the first or last lesson of the day (so as to prevent those who do not attend such lessons from taking undue breaks) and the exclusion of the grade in catechesis earned by the student from the calculation of the yearly average grade (that helps students to be admitted to higher-grade schools) as well as the elimination of the academic subject of religion/ethics from the list of “optional” subjects for the General Certificate of Secondary Education. Therefore, the Bishops “call all the devotees to take actions to promote lessons of catechesis in the schools” and in particular they “ask Catholic parents to bravely take position about such issue” and make the same call to “the Catholic media and movements and to the religious communities” too. As to the Government’s plan, the teachers’ union that takes inspiration from the Solidarnosc tradition (a civil society movement, the protests of which led to the collapse of the Soviet regime in Poland) expresses utmost concern for the potential loss of at least 10 thousand jobs. The trade union also points out that the composition of the unified classes during the hour of religion could make the lessons of catechesis start at 7 am or after 2 pm, at the end of the other lessons. The trade union thinks that such a situation might discourage the students, who might be unwilling to get to school so early in the morning or stay on for so much longer. Taking position about the criticism of the reform, Nowacka said she is “aware the interests of a group might be affected”, because “the Church has got used to benefiting from the fact that teachers of catechesis, especially priests, are currently paid for by the State”. The Minister, hoping in an actual “separation of Church and State”, also added that, “with all due respect and understanding for the Church”, she believes that “the Polish Church, without any problem, with its own means and its own potentials, can organise lessons of catechesis for those who want them”. According to statistics, while in the year 2018/2019 nearly 81% of secondary-school students attended lessons of catechesis, last year their number did not exceed 60%. Similar statistics have been found in vocational schools. In Poland, attendance of religious education is not compulsory but optional, as chosen by the student’s parents.

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