**Building Resilient Religious Education Teachers: Personal Reflections**

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**Introduction**

In my presentation, I aim to delve into the personal experiences of our graduates who are navigating significant tests of resilience as novice teachers. Through their narratives, I intend to illustrate how our university is actively fostering their capacity to confront life's challenges with a hopeful perspective.

The initial segment of my paper will contextualize the experiences of our graduates within the broader framework of research findings on job satisfaction among Slovak teachers. Subsequently, I will explore two distinct perspectives on resilience. The first will be grounded in virtue ethics, while the second will delve into the Christian concept of the gift. Finally, in the fourth part, I will provide recommendations for the building of religious education teachers.

**1. Results of Research on Job Satisfaction among Slovak Teachers**

The research on factors influencing teachers' well-being and job satisfaction, conducted in Slovakia in 2023, reveals a stark reality: 41% of teachers express dissatisfaction with their mental and emotional well-being (Orosová et al. 2023). This discontent is rooted in the demanding nature of administrative tasks, the struggle with limited time for lesson preparation, a decline in student interest, perceived lack of parental support, and inadequate financial compensation. These findings resonate with the challenges our graduates have encountered.

To quote the emotional words of one graduate, 'I found it extremely challenging to plan for each and every week, finding ways to approach topics that even adults struggle to understand, capturing the pupils' attention, and simultaneously presenting it in a way that leaves a lasting impact on their hearts. Sometimes I succeeded more, sometimes less, but I invested all my energy into it for that year until I reached a point where I didn't have the energy to continue this work. (...) Coping with the chaos became increasingly difficult, especially with at least five children with some form of disorder in almost every class.'

Moreover, being a religious education teacher introduces specific challenges. For instance, the grief of not being understood by the management regarding the subject matter is a recurring theme. Another graduate shares, 'The last straw was during distance education when I was searching for voluntary activities for my pupils – stimulating media channels, mobile phone Bible games, and other religious content. Despite receiving positive responses from pupils and parents, the head teacher forbade me, stating, and I quote, "burdening and annoying the pupils and parents with anything religious"' (personal correspondence, 21.01.2021).

These vivid and heartfelt stories not only shed light on the struggles but also underscore the need for strategies to help student teachers cultivate resilience in the face of such challenges.

**2. Resilience as a Virtue**

Psychological research underscores that teachers who possess altruistic motivations and a high degree of autonomy in their performance are better equipped to manage stress (Beltman, 2011; Gu and Day, 2007). This revelation converges with ethical reflection, as a firm resolution to help and creatively engage with students serves as a protective shield against capitulation. At this juncture, ethical considerations come into play, framing the unwavering commitment to will and do good as a virtue of justice. Engaging religious education students in ethical reflection becomes helpful in illuminating their mission through the lens of virtue ethics.

During this process, future teachers gain clarity about the profound reasons that drive their vocational choices. The initial motivations transcend to deeper convictions, recognizing that by

embracing their mission, they become co-creators of a world founded on inner peace and respect for all people (cf. Benedict XVI 2008). However, the pursuit of justice, an inherent aspect of virtue, demands effort and toil. In the basic logic of virtue, fortitude becomes indispensable; as Pieper (1973, p. 53) articulates, "justice requires our fortitude." To be truly brave, according to ethical principles, entails having a firm spirit (firmitas animi) in both doing good and enduring evil, especially in situations that are challenging, whether they involve good or evil (Aquinas, II-II, 139, 1).

Resilience emerges as an essential quality for teachers. The inherent nature of teaching dictates that not every lesson will go seamlessly, not every interaction with the class will be harmonious, and not every method will yield success. To prevent discouragement, a teacher must not only believe in their mission but also actively seek new reasons for hope. This dynamic interplay of psychological insights and ethical considerations underscores the profound importance of resilience in the teaching profession.

**3. Resilience as a Gift**

Benedict XVI eloquently articulated, "Only the great certitude of hope that my own life and history in general, despite all failures, are held firm by the indestructible power of Love, and that this gives them their meaning and importance, only this kind of hope can then give the courage to act and to persevere" (Benedict XVI, 2007, n. 35). True and unbreakable hope springs from God's love and His invitation to enter into a communion of life with Him. All other hopes for victories in the classroom and personal life emanate from this foundational hope, appearing as indistinct images and shadows of it (cf. Pieper 1997).

Christian hope enriches virtuous resilience by introducing a new layer. It transcends the depths of one's will to do good, finding its grounding in God's promise and gift. The Holy Spirit, in the gift of strength, infuses into the heart of a person the certainty of escaping all dangers and pitfalls (Aquinas, II-II, q. 139, a. 1), eliminating the need for fear. A teacher who is inwardly assured of God's power will fearlessly navigate humanly and professionally challenging environments when prudence demands. The gift of strength enables the teacher to maintain an eternal perspective amid difficulties, staying anchored in God (Titus 2006, p. 293).

Hence, the ultimate strength of a teacher who persists despite discomfort and vocational challenges is derived from grace and the divine flow of power into their interior. This awareness brings forth the consciousness that God Himself, in sending the teacher among their pupils, is actively at work in them. The burden of teaching is no longer carried solely on the teacher's shoulders; it is borne by the trust that God's love both precedes and accompanies them. This profound understanding transforms the teacher's journey, infusing it with a sense of purpose and divine guidance.

**4. Recommendations**

In concluding and offering recommendations for the practice and education of future teachers of religious education, the emphasis extends beyond the mere imparting of philosophical and theological foundations of resilience. Drawing from my experience of working with students, I assert that dialogue stands out as the most crucial aspect of the classroom dynamic. It transcends traditional teaching methodologies, transforming the educational process into a collaborative journey based on relationships and shared inquiry.

My interaction with students has illuminated the significance of this dialogical approach, where the goal is to bridge theory and the intricate tapestry of students' life situations. It transcends the boundaries of conventional teaching, fostering an environment where theoretical knowledge intertwines with the practicalities of life. The resonance of this application dimension is vividly expressed in the feedback received from one student: 'Sometimes at university, I feel like I'm

in a fast train, merely glimpsing the landscape I desired to explore. However, in my Christian philosophy classes, I was able to step off the train and touch the landscape because we had time to reflect on everything and bring knowledge into our lives" (2021).

Real teaching, as evidenced by this student's perspective, involves not just the transmission of information but a profound engagement with reality – both our own and the experiences of those who preceded us. Words, in this context, are not ends in themselves but pointers to a deeper reality. The mastery of the precious skill of listening and engaging in meaningful dialogue equips students with a transformative "method." This method serves as a guiding light, sustaining them not only in times of crisis but also empowering them to discover innovative ways to reach the hearts of their students. The student's journey becomes a dynamic, reciprocal exchange, where the landscape of knowledge is not merely observed but actively touched and integrated into their lives. This approach, rooted in dialogue and reflective listening, lays the foundation for resilient educators capable of navigating the complexities of teaching with empathy, understanding, and a profound connection to the lived experiences of their students.

**Conclusion**

As I conclude, I transition from the story of a graduate who left education to the uplifting narrative of another graduate, serving as a positive exemplar. In his thirties, he assumed responsibility for a mixed class of seventh through ninth graders, a group that had posed challenges for previous religion teachers. In a lesson, he engaged the students by asking for examples of how a person can lose confidence and the courage to move forward. Suddenly, a seventh grader courageously spoke up: "Mr. Teacher, when you came in as a new teacher, I thought you would be scared of our class, lose your courage, and leave like the teachers before you."

This touching testimony stands as a powerful reminder that our determination to stand firm in the face of challenges leaves an indelible impression in the minds and hearts of those we teach. Students yearn for teachers who do not flee, who exhibit perseverance, and who remain steadfast in the midst of challenging educational situations. Even when teachers navigate situations imperfectly, students sense internally that the teachers genuinely care and aspire to do well by them.

Our exploration throughout this presentation has demonstrated that motivating teachers to be co-creators of a better world and deepening their sense of hope equips them to fulfil this vital role. When we actively embody the essence of hope in our lives, we become beacons of hope and resilience for our students. Through our commitment to fostering a positive and transformative learning environment, we contribute to the development of resilient educators who not only weather the storms of teaching but also inspire and guide their students towards a brighter future.

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