**Article of the Week #1**

**Directions:**

1. **Show evidence of a close reading (highlighting key points and making notes in the margins – can be questions, thoughts, confusion, etc.)**
2. **Answer the question at the bottom of the article.**

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# Student files human-rights complaint against Catholic high school, board

[Caroline Alphonso](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/authors/caroline-alphonso) EDUCATION REPORTER — The Globe and Mail

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When Claudia Sorgini asked to be excused from religious courses and liturgies\* at her Catholic high school in Ontario, she was taken aback by the response: She would also be excluded from a variety of non-academic activities and assemblies, including a mental-health awareness assembly, the graduation-preparation assembly and an honour-roll breakfast. The school considered them “faith-filled” events.

Ms. Sorgini has filed a human-rights complaint against the school, the school board and the trustees’ association for “a continuous pattern of discrimination and reprisal in connection with her request for an exemption from religious courses and activities” in her last year of high school, according to her application, a copy of which was obtained by The Globe and Mail.

The complaint, launched with the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario, comes two years after a court ruled that students cannot be forced to participate.

According to a provision added to the Education Act in the 1980s, any student qualified to attend a public high school cannot be required to take religious courses. Public boards accept all students. But some Catholic schools are finding loopholes and making it more difficult or outright denying exemptions, earlier complaints to school boards indicate.

The issue of granting exemptions from religious studies has some observers wondering if the province really needs a publicly funded separate school system.

Ms. Sorgini, 18, is now a first-year engineering student at Queen’s University. She graduated from St. Theresa’s Catholic High School in Midland, Ont., last year with a 98-per-cent average.

In her complaint, Ms. Sorgini said she chose to attend St. Theresa’s rather than the secular high school because it offered a more extensive selection of physics courses and a chance to become involved in music productions. Her parents are not Catholic school ratepayers and she is not Catholic.

In her final year, Ms. Sorgini learned it was possible to get an exemption from religious courses, and applied for it. Her parents said in an interview that their daughter wanted to focus on her heavy workload in science and math. “She wanted the academic background,” said her father, Richard Sorgini.

Students attending Catholic high schools are expected to take four religious courses, one at each grade level, unless they receive an exemption.

After much wrangling with the Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board, north of Toronto, Ms. Sorgini was granted the exemption. However, she was told that she would still have to attend liturgies, and if she wanted to be excused from that, she would be denied entry into virtually all non-academic programs. Ms. Sorgini and her parents referred in their response to the school board to a 2014 court case brought by a Brampton father against the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board. A panel of three judges ruled that students had a right to be exempted from religious programs.

In the end, Ms. Sorgini was not barred from non-academic events.

But throughout her last year of schooling, Ms. Sorgini stated in her complaint, school administration treated her differently than other students in regards to her schooling and scholarships.

During her graduation ceremony, the school trustee addressed the room on behalf of the Ontario Catholic School Trustees’ Association, thanking students and parents for their support of Catholic education. “At this time, I openly urge you to pledge your belief in our system,” the trustee said, according to the human-rights application. “Your continued support will be needed for our existence in the future years.” The complaint says the family believes the comments were directed at students who did not share the Catholic faith.

The school board and OCSTA received the complaint application late last week. Both declined to comment on the case, saying they will respond to the human rights tribunal.

A spokeswoman for Education Minister Liz Sandals said it is the government’s expectation that all school boards follow the Education Act. The exemption is allowed because Catholic high schools are publicly funded and enrolment is open to non-Catholics.

Ms. Sorgini‘s parents said she is reluctant to speak publicly about her complaint, which was filed in early January. Her lawyer, Paul Champ, said Catholic school boards have been misleading students about their rights. “In some ugly cases, students who try to exercise their legal right to an exemption suffer intimidation and harassment by school officials,” Mr. Champ said. “That’s what happened to my client.”

The Sorginis say they are not looking for a fight, but they want Catholic boards to be accountable for the way they treat students and their families.

“Our attitude is if you’re going to take public funding to educate these students, then you should be informing them that they are not required to take religious programming,” Mr. Sorgini said.

**\*liturgies -** a fixed set of ceremonies, words, etc., that are used during public worship in a religion (ex: mass, Holy Communion).

**Response Question (answer in paragraph form and staple to this sheet):** Do you feel that if a student chooses to attend Catholic school, they should have to participate in the religious liturgy and courses? Or do you believe that students should have the option to be exempt from these activities?

**Response Question (answer in paragraph form and staple to this sheet): Do you agree that companies should have a right to collect data on your internet activity? Why or why not?**

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