

82023

Johnson, George
ADS5740

Contribution of Catholic Education to American Life

BY

REV. GEORGE JOHNSON, Ph.D.

Executive Secretary, N. C. W. C. Department of Education



NATIONAL CATHOLIC WELFARE CONFERENCE
1312 Massachusetts Avenue, N. W.
Washington, D. C.

THE BELVEDERE PRESS, INC.
BALTIMORE, MD.



Deacidified

Contribution of Catholic Education to American Life

SOME TWENTY MILLION citizens of the United States of America are members of the Catholic Church. They believe that a certain definite body of religious truths is immutably true, and they cherish the conviction that their lives in every detail must be regulated in accordance with these truths. For them, if they respect the implications of their Faith, religion is not just one phase of life, a thing apart, to be exercised at certain times and seasons. It is all of life. It is their personal relationship with God and as such it permeates and transmutes every relationship. In every doubt it is a source of light; in every weakness it is a tower of strength; in every failure it is a promise of hope; in every victory it is a suggestion of humility. The good Catholic lives constantly in the presence of God and views all things from the standpoint of the eternal. He is convinced that all his thinking, feeling and doing should begin and end in Jesus Christ.

It is what the Catholic believes concerning Jesus Christ that determines his thought in every field of knowledge. This faith is the corner-stone of his intellectual life, even as it is the ultimate sanction of his moral life. He believes that Jesus Christ is true God and true man, that the Eternal Word, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, assumed a human nature for the purpose of redeeming man from sin

and of reestablishing the Kingdom of God on earth. Christ is not just a prophet, a seer, a great popular leader, an exceptional philosopher, but He is God—God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of the same nature and substance as the Father, by Whom all things were made.

The Catholic believes that Christ established a Church, and that this Church is quite unique among institutions known to man. It is not just a particular school of thought, destined to perpetuate the opinions of its Founder. It is not just a vehicle for the expression of a certain type of religious and social aspiration. As a matter of fact, it is not a human institution at all. It is the projection of Jesus Christ across the ages. "Behold, I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world." It is the means established by the Son of God to achieve the purposes of His Incarnation. In the words of St. Paul, it is the "Body of Christ."

Because the Church is one with Christ, She partakes in his unique prerogatives as the Son of God. Her decisions in matters of faith and morals are infallible. She provides sacramental means for applying the power of Divine Grace to human weakness. In her teachings are found the way that leads to happiness—the truth that frees the mind from the slavery of error, the life that Christ came to bring and to bring in abundance.

The Catholic asks, What is man—what is human nature? He finds the answer in the teachings of his Church. Man is not merely an animal of a relatively higher development; he is something unique among living things. He is a creature composed of body and soul. The soul gives life to the body and is the object of a special creative act of God. When it leaves the body the body dies, but the soul continues to live.

It is immortal. At the end of time the body will rise again from the dead, to be reunited with the soul for all eternity.

The Catholic learns from his Church that when God created the first man he raised him up above a purely natural level and made him a partaker in His own Divine life. Man thus became, in very truth, the child of God, endowed with powers of knowing and doing above his natural capacities, and destined for that happiness which is born of complete union with God.

All of this was contingent upon man's readiness to subject his self-will to the will of God. In the test the first man failed. He disobeyed God. He sinned. As a consequence, he lost these supernatural gifts for himself and for his posterity. Though they were subsequently restored by means of the redemption wrought by Jesus Christ, the effects of the Fall remained. The guilt itself is washed away in our baptism in Christ, but there persists a darkness of the mind, a weakness of the will, and a general downward tendency. The Catholic believes in Original Sin and its effects. He does not believe that by reason of Original Sin human kind is totally depraved. He does not believe that it is incapable of any good whatsoever, but he does believe that any social, economic, political or educational program must inevitably fail if it neglects the fact of Original Sin. Every movement for the betterment of human society must begin with the regeneration of the individual.

From his Church the Catholic learns certain definite things about human destiny. Man was not made for himself, for society, for the State or for any other created thing. He was made for the glory of God. The destiny of man is determined by the Divine Will. According to Divine Revelation, as interpreted by the Church, that destiny is

accomplished when the individual sinks himself and all his interests in the love of God and strives in every way to lead a Godlike life, according to the example set for him by Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This life is but a stepping stone to a higher life. Earth is the means given to man to prove himself worthy of heaven. The vocation of a Christian is to labor manfully for the establishment of God's Kingdom. Whilst it is true that this Kingdom will be perfectly established in heaven, it is likewise true that its beginnings must be established here upon earth. Hence, the Catholic is obliged in conscience to strive for the progressive betterment of the conditions of human living, and he is not absolved from responsibility for such human ills as might be eradicated through the application of his intelligence and effort. He is commanded to love God with all his heart and soul and mind and strength, but he is at the same time reminded that any declaration of love for God is vain and false if it does not include a love for his neighbor.

Such, according to the teachings of the Catholic Church, is the vocation and destiny of mankind. It is the only way to happiness. Because it is supernatural, it cannot be achieved by purely natural means. Christ said, "Without me you can do nothing." St. Paul exclaims, "I can do all things in Him that strengthens me." In other words, man cannot achieve his destiny by his own unaided powers. He needs the assistance of Divine Grace.

Such are the fundamentals of Catholic belief that dictate the Catholic philosophy of life. For the Catholic they are not mere theories. He regards them as fixed and certain. His experience in living according to them has proven satisfactory. In them he has found comfort and happiness and peace.

This being so, what is more natural than that he should desire to transmit them to his children? Accordingly, he builds schools in which Catholic children are taught the elements of Catholic faith and morals, the while they are being instructed in secular knowledge. In every age since the days of the Apostles, Catholics have maintained schools. They could never be satisfied with a scheme of education which would concentrate upon the things of this world to the neglect of religion.

The State maintains a system of free, tax-supported schools. Originally these schools were religious in character, but sectarian jealousies rendered it impossible to maintain them on this basis. As a consequence, they limit their educational program to preparation for those phases of life which are purely secular, leaving to the churches the task of supplying religious instruction outside of school hours.

The Catholic sees in this arrangement a compromise dictated by necessity. It may be good opportunism, but he cannot justify it to himself on the basis of his philosophy of education. He has no desire to limit the opportunities for education that his non-Catholic neighbors are providing for their children. Yet he wants his own children to be educated according to the teachings of the Catholic Church. Such an education they cannot receive in the public schools. He would not be satisfied with the palliative of the Sunday School. He desires for his children a school in which the Catholic religion is the foundation, the interpretation, the atmosphere of all instruction.

The parent is invested with the primary right to determine the education of his child. This is sound social philosophy. It has the sanction of the Supreme Court of the United States. It is a fundamental American principle, a safeguard

of liberty and democracy. Acting upon it, the Catholic builds, equips and maintains his own schools.

Thus it happens that there is today in the United States a system of schools extending from the kindergarten to the university, established by Catholics and by them voluntarily supported, in which the attempt is being made to provide an education in accordance with the Catholic interpretation of the spirit of Jesus Christ. In effect, this great project is a glorious contribution that Catholics are making to the welfare of their country. Financially, it represents a considerable saving to the commonwealth. Catholics contribute their share to the support of public instruction; meanwhile they provide their own schools for their own children. If the Catholic schools were closed tomorrow, millions of children would be thrown on the resources of the State. However, this is a mere detail. The real contribution of the Catholic school to American democracy is something infinitely more precious than mere money. It is something that enters into the very warp and woof of our national life and insures the perpetuation of our most cherished institutions.

First of all, Catholic education makes for the development of that sound individualism which is the cornerstone of democracy. This is because it insists upon the sacred character of human personality. Belief in an immortal soul, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and destined for eternal union with God, must produce a respect for the human race that could never be the fruit of materialistic philosophy and behaviouristic psychology. One's sense of responsibility towards one's fellow man takes on a new significance when one recalls the words of the Saviour, "Whatsoever you do to the least of my brethren you do unto me." One's own

sense of self-respect, the guardian of fundamental rights, is strengthened when one ponders over the text—"Ye are gods and sons of the Most High."

The reverence which results from the conviction that we were created by God, for God's purposes, and hence, that we belong to God, produces in the heart that most beautiful of all noble traits, humility. "The Son of Man came, not to be ministered unto, but to minister." The humble man realizes that it is the will of God that is significant and not his own whims. The world does not revolve around him, but he, in common with all things created, revolves around God. Mr. Walter Lippman has named "disinterestedness" as the virtue most necessary in a modern world. Only he can be utterly disinterested who, in season and out, is conscious that his destiny is to do the will of God, and to lose himself in the service of others for the love of God. This is the very definition of humility.

Out of humility grows charity. The ideal of Catholic education dictates that the child be inspired to grow in love for his fellow man as he grows in love for God. Now democracy is a form of human association that relies ultimately, not upon force and compulsion, but upon free cooperation. Such cooperation is born of a sense of common interest. The realization of mere physical needs experienced in common is no guarantee against disintegration. The only safe bond is love. The man who sees Jesus Christ in his fellow man, who realizes that the interests of his fellow man are the interests of his Saviour, will have the strongest motive in the world for making all the many sacrifices of time and effort and money that are necessary if more and more people are to have life and have it more and more abundantly. This love is the foundation of true civic virtue, of that

quality of citizenship that is ready, not only in some major crisis in the affairs of the nation, but constantly, day in and day out, at work or at play, to think and act in terms of the common good, be the cost to self whatever it may.

His belief in Original Sin and in the salvation wrought by Jesus Christ implants in the heart of the Catholic child the principle of self-discipline through self-sacrifice. He learns that a Crucified Head demands crucified members, and that being part of the Mystical Body of Christ, he must fill up what is wanting in the sufferings of Christ. He must cooperate in his own regeneration. He must do violence to his selfish impulses and desires if he would grow up in all things to the Head, even unto Christ.

In other words, Catholic education is based on the principle of asceticism. This fact alone should recommend the Catholic school to the sympathetic attention of thinking Americans. At the present moment no trait in a citizen is more valuable for American life than self-abnegation. It is the only guarantee of obedience to law. It renders unnecessary that multiplication of laws which threatens to bring all the law into disrepute. Legal enactments, backed by all the police power which the State can muster, will forever fail in their purpose with a populace that is unregenerate. "The Kingdom of God is within you." Obedience is a virtue that is born of a natural distrust of self and a willingness to do violence to self for a higher good. Those who from childhood have learned that there is no redemption save in the shedding of blood, who have learned the rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic at the foot of the crucifix, whose teachers, in personality, garb and demeanor, exemplify, even to the smallest details of their lives, the principle of self-sacrifice, who have tasted the joy that is born of mortifying

themselves in little ways from day to day, are splendidly equipped to accept the burdens of liberty and to bear the responsibility of freedom.

Finally, the Catholic school develops in the child the attitude of faith. He acquires the disposition to believe. Conscious of the limitations of his finite intelligence as compared with the infinite intelligence of God, he does not envisage, as the only possible world, the world that only he can know and understand. Faith liberates the mind and lends it the courage to dream dreams. Faith is an antidote against the dread poison of disillusion and cynicism which is working such havoc in certain circles today. Faith in God breeds faith in man and that valid faith in self laboring in partnership with the Divine. "I can do all things in Him that strengthens me." Whatever the peril of the moment, whatever the selfishness, the stupidity and the cupidity of his contemporaries, the Catholic, sustained by his faith, emboldened by his hope, mellowed by his charity, can face the future with gleaming eye and glowing countenance, knowing that the high resolves of his nation and his nation's founders can be achieved and will be achieved, according as men learn to put less and less trust in themselves and more and more trust in God.

This is the contribution the Catholic school would make to American life. Needless to say, it has not as yet succeeded in perfecting this contribution. Educational practice always lags behind educational ideals. It is one thing to have a great vision and another thing to understand the mechanism whereby that vision can be realized through classroom procedure. All education is experimental in character. Catholic schools may have failed to measure up in all things to their full possibilities, but at least they have clung

fast to their fundamentals, as the loyal, devoted, unobtrusive, self-sacrificing lives of the Catholic rank and file attest. The Catholic school in the United States looks forward to the future with firm hope and high resolve. It feels it has a great contribution to make to its beloved country. With the aid of pedagogical science, it is striving to master its method. In the free atmosphere of America it can thrive, protected by that tolerance which has been written into our fundamental laws and which is characteristic of the American people. As the years go on, it will yield to the nation a richer and a richer harvest because it plants its seed for the glory of God.