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The Religious Teacher



M. J. O'Connor, S.J.

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The Religious Teacher

Paper Read by the Rev. M. J. O'Connor, S.J., at the Annual Convention of the Catholic Educational Association, Pittsburgh, Pa., June 26, 1912.

SOME years ago, in 1906 to be exact, Cardinal Bourne Archbishop of Westminster in his Lenten Pastoral set forth officially the claims of the Catholics of England in the matter of educational facilities for their children. His Eminence in this document blazed no new pathways; indeed, there was no occasion to do so, since, as he affirmed, "Our position is well known, so well known in fact, that to some it may seem useless to insist again upon it." But, in the heat of controversial discussion of the Educational Bill just then before Parliament, there was danger lest, under the pressure of forces which no individual could control, the country should drift into a deadlock of conflicting principles. To avoid such a deadlock a less sturdy leader might have sought salvation in temporizing compromise. The Catholic minority in the British Isles have not usually enjoyed that due consideration of their conscientious wishes on the part of the powerful majority which might lend them sustaining hope in the contest then raging.

Yet there is no suggestion of compromise in the ringing words of the Cardinal Archbishop: "We are prepared to further in every way a lasting settlement of the education difficulty, in so far as we can do so consistently

with those sacred principles which we can never surrender, because they belong to God, and are not ours to give. . . . What, then, is our claim? A Catholic education and not a Protestant education, whether the latter be expressed in its simplest or most highly developed terms. A Catholic education implies three things: Catholic schools, Catholic teachers, effective Catholic oversight of all that pertains to religious teaching and influence.

“First, *Catholic schools*, that is, schools in which, as in a Catholic home, all the surroundings shall be such as to keep alive the religious influence, which is an essential part of Catholic life and practice; where, in a word, there can be no doubt at first sight, even to the casual visitor, that the school is intended for and frequented by Catholic children. Secondly, *Catholic teachers*. To a very large extent teachers, in dealing with children of the class needing elementary schools, have to take the place of parents. Circumstances are such at the present day that many parents are unable from want of time or lack of capacity, and too often from neglect and indifference, to provide adequately for the education of their children. And Catholic parents, however neglectful and indifferent they may be, when they place their children at a Catholic school, do so in the hope and with the conviction, that their children will receive therein the Catholic education which they are themselves unable to impart; in other words, that the teachers will truly stand to these children in *loco parentis Catholici*. No one but a Catholic can hold such a place. Thirdly, *effective Catholic oversight of all that pertains to religious teaching and influence*. Only those who are representatives of the Catholic

Church can give to Catholic parents the assurance which they need and rightly ask, that the teachers to whom they entrust their children are Catholics not merely in name, but in deed, and that their teaching and influence are in accordance with the principles of the Catholic Church. This in a few words is our most just claim."

Why do I thus lengthily cite his Eminence's statement today? In one word, because it serves as a singularly apposite basis or text for all that may be said regarding the topic I have been asked to develop before you on this occasion. Few of us, I believe, will question the assertion that educational development among us Catholics has not proceeded generally from any fixed educational principle or according to any systematic plan. Rather it has grown out of the peculiar situation facing the sturdy immigrants flocking to our shores to enjoy here a blessedness of peace unknown to them in lands beyond the seas. Arriving in this country they recognize that they are free to follow their inclinations respecting the kind of education their children should receive, and soundly Catholic as they are, they prefer this education to be given them under Catholic auspices, aye, even though the preference involved a heavy burden of sacrifice. Our Church authorities naturally fostered this disposition of the Faithful and to meet the demands it imposed upon themselves they were urgent first and above all to provide the material equipment which a Catholic training of the little ones made imperative. The school first, was the eager cry in the building of parishes made necessary by the wonderful spread of the Church in our favored land. We all recall the slogan of the great Archbishop Hughes who used to say: "If we build not schools

for the rising generation we shall not need churches in which the men and women to come may worship.”

The exigencies of the work in earlier days allowed prelates and pastors little leisure to plan and to systematize the actual instruction imparted in the schools which began to dot the land; the best that could be done was the satisfying rule in most cases, and our parochial school system, if the phrase were used at all, was barely a thing of shreds and patches. With the passing, however, of the years of struggle for material existence there came an awakening to the intellectual phase of the school problem and a zealous purpose on the part of our leaders to organize and systematize our educational work and to bring unity and order out of the confusion that reigned in the ideals, aims, methods and studies of Catholic schools.

And there was grave reason for the awakening. Consciously or unconsciously we have been influenced, and some of us to a very intense degree, by the standards and methods prevailing in secular schools. It is hardly the place here to discuss the growth of this influence; perhaps, in many cases, it was entirely due to the lack of system and order in our own schools, but the fact is not to be questioned. Many Catholic teachers have slipped into the habit of adapting themselves almost as a matter of course to conditions prevailing in these schools, have come to think their methods best, their system in its round of petty details to be worthy of closest imitation. Let me assure you quite frankly, were this state of mind to take final possession of Catholic teachers, men and women, we might bid a speedy good-bye to sacred tradi-

tions, without, I venture to say, the saving return of order and system we are eager to secure.

To save ourselves from ourselves it is of first importance that we Catholics open our eyes to the pressing need of a thoroughgoing study of the educational problem from an essentially Catholic viewpoint, in order that, in the development of our system from the lowest grade of the elementary school to the highest course of university research work, there be no haphazard building but an ever consistent progress based on sane principles of sound Catholic thought. It is not necessary, nay it is scarcely possible to build an educational system so rigidly fixed in the details of its various parts, as to permit no flexibility in its adaptation to local and accidental conditions affecting Catholic schools. There are, however, certain fundamental principles; certain broad outlines of educational methods based on sound philosophy as well as on the traditions and experience of centuries of Catholic life, which we must loyally stand for, and it is these broad outlines we find boldly emphasized by his Eminence of Westminster. The scope of this paper does not make it needful to deal with all that his golden words imply, but, to my mind, the head and front of his demands converge about what he has to say regarding Catholic teachers, our present topic of discussion.

It were a waste of time to insist, before such an assembly as this, that the good repute of our Catholic schools rests upon this assurance: In all that makes for a liberal education Catholic institutions are doing at least as good work as corresponding secular institutions, while they excel beyond comparison in what serves to strengthen the will and to make the pupils loyal to con-

science; loyal to the responsibility of keeping faith alive and the practice of religion in an atmosphere which too often is one of cold faith and slack observance. Neither is it needed to recall that in secular schools of the day indifferentism has become almost the rule among teachers, atheism is quite common, agnosticism is very fashionable and a deeply religious spirit extremely exceptional. It will not be out of place, however, to remind you how vital it is, precisely because of the fear lest the good repute of Catholic education be besmirched with the defects prevalent in secular schools, that the distinguishing characteristic of any perfected system of educational work to be evolved for our guidance and direction must be an effective Catholic instinct in all that pertains to educational training. Our teachers must be Catholic, not merely in name, but in deed, their teaching and influence, their ideals, their aims, methods and studies must be in absolute accord with the principles of the Catholic Church. With us the essential in education is right character building, and no matter how ripe the scholarship attained, no matter how wide his range of activity in the field of study, one has not compassed this if in his progress through the years, thoroughness of instruction in religious truth, correct moral formation and an unceasing insistence upon a high sense of duty have failed to rule his training. These neglected, say we, man's preparation for his Divinely appointed mission must be a failure.

How little the aping of non-Catholic methods and ways will avail us in the achievement of this ideal ought to be patent to everyone. It may be conceded that the world about us today is much exercised over what it is pleased

to consider its very full and broad conception of education. Never was so much money expended in a multiplicity of schemes to further it, never was so much thought bestowed to perfect it, and in view of all that is expected, never, so say wise critics, never were such unsatisfactory results obtained. And affirming this, one need run no risk of being termed disloyal to American ideas. One is not un-American when he but uses the privilege conceded to every citizen to refer to defects existent in civic methods. However in our present instance the judgment is expressed in the very home of the closest friends and supporters of the non-Catholic school system. It would surely be difficult to utter more pointed and emphatic disapproval of public school instruction than that pronounced by prominent leaders of that system in last year's convention of the National Association in San Francisco. The claim was made by one representative in the gathering that: "Civic sloth and depravity are general throughout the country because the schools fail to train for citizenship"; another affirmed that the "pressing problem in education is to arouse in the life of each person dealing with children the conviction that the moral and religious development of the child is an immediate necessity"; a third brought the startling charge against modern educational practice that "the blame for backwardness among school children and mental deficiency was due to the crowded and elaborate school curricula current in our schools of late years"; still another, a well-known settlement worker, called upon the teachers of the National Association to turn from the "bread and butter" attitude with which too many of them viewed their profession and urged upon them the imperative need to turn

to higher ideals, to combat the influence of an age strangely turning to materialism.

Conscientious loyalty to the principle that from the first has been as the very breath of life to our teaching will save the Catholic teacher from these and similar criticisms. It can hardly be expected that men will lead good moral lives of uprightness, honesty, purity, faith and charity unless they have been taught what righteousness means and the supreme reasons inducing us to tread its pathway. This implies a duty to afford children a Christian education, one that will combine with the best secular instruction a thorough training in the doctrines and precepts of religion and morality. The Catholic teacher must realize that the influence of religion should permeate the child's soul as the air we breathe permeates our bodies. Religion thus ingrained in the very being and life of children will enable them to hold themselves firmly in the path of duty however fierce the storms of temptation they may encounter in after years.

We who are here today need not be reminded that the Catholic system, effectively to achieve this purpose, deals not with virtue in the abstract, but sets before the pupil shining examples in the lives of the teachers themselves who must be without reproach. We who have been trained within the walls of institutions where the Catholic spirit dominated, can vouch for the strong formative influence exercised in our own callow years, by the charm of the examples of those who taught us that there are such things in the world as duty, and right, and obedience, and reverence for law, and the obligation to serve God, and to deal justly with all; and our own experience will be our best inspiration and incentive to prove in our own

work the ennobling stimulus of religious teaching in the formation of character. Paraphrasing a beautiful thought of Cardinal Newman that experience will enable us to understand how the religious teacher soars over the dark creation of the human mind and heart; to recall how at the word of such a teacher mirroring the charm of saintly precept in the exquisite beauty of saintly lives, darkness is dissipated, harmonies of good rise out of mental and moral chaos, the dawn of reasonable life begins; noble ideas, the stars of the soul, mount up to the firmament of thought and man is created because his soul lives.

There may be some, even here, who will resent this strong insistence upon the religious note in educational training and deem it an uncalled for subordination of every other detail of formation to the moral element in education. And yet how can any one who believes in the existence of God, and of a life eternal find fault with the principle however rigid it appears? Unfortunately our age has seen a development of a disposition which appears content with superficial sippings of truth, and foibles and follies and vanities too frequently reign where reason alone should rule. Even among ourselves there are not wanting "up-to-date" critics whose pronouncements indicate but passing reverence for these fundamental truths on which if our traditions—and traditions are sacred things among Catholics—are to be conserved, true educational progress and development must be based.

Notwithstanding the fact that the spirit of our age is one which offers little to charm and to attract one to build his life work on its model; notwithstanding that its threefold combination of a shirking of labor, a squander-

ing of time in frivolous occupation and an unconquerable dread of even temporary seclusion from the world's tumults and confusion suggests little to help us safeguard and further those common interests most highly prized by the true educator, there is a disposition among us to accept the dictum clothing that beautiful vague proposition, "We must cut away from the unprogressive ruling of primitive days, we must adapt ourselves to the times in which we live." And as a consequence whether it be a foolish desire to measure up to non-Catholic institutions, whose standards are not and cannot be our standards; or whether it be owing to improper influence or a culpable negligence on the part of those whose charge it is to guide and direct the teachers in our schoolrooms, we not unrarely find in study programs and in schedules of study courses approved and used by Catholic teachers in Catholic schools a surprising divergence in practical execution from the ideals, aims, methods and studies which loyal and cordial allegiance to this fundamental principle should suggest.

But let us have care. Popular systems and present theories and accepted study programs wrought out by teachers however intensive, however active, however keenly interested in up-to-date pedagogy, if they be based not on truths that answer man's deepest inspirations and if they satisfy not man's highest hopes, can have no part in our system. Nor are we narrow and bigoted when we insist upon this. Narrowness and limitation belong rather to the system in which is found no solid resting place for duty and destiny; no law of right action; no form of right living: in a system, in one word, which

may teach one how to make a living but cannot train one to live.

Whatever be the unified course of instruction eventually to be agreed upon for all our schools:—and it will not be out of place here to voice the prayer that the wise men who build it for us will once and for all suppress the crowded and elaborate school curricula unhappily growing into currency among us—it must be clear that if there be any *raison d'être* for Catholic education, it proves conclusively the necessity of the subordination of every other detail of our program to character training along Catholic lines. Catholic teachers, therefore, should not need the warning that the moral and sterling integrity which strengthen men and women to stand to the “storm and stress” of everyday life are not developed by any process of veneering or through the mere influence of improved surroundings. These have a certain value, to be sure, and they help in the work to be done; but true, permanent character must have its roots within, in the power of choice, in self-determination, in conscious personal effort. The child at every stage of his training must feel that he can do something toward his own elevation and improvement and that he ought consequently to do something. The thought is very happily put in a paper prepared by a Sister teaching in one of the parochial schools of Columbus, Ohio, and read in a meeting of Catholic teachers in that city some few weeks ago: “There must be something more than a general spirit of piety in our teaching. We should teach our children to build—build for eternity—and this should be done very simply. Their building material must be their daily little duties as they present themselves. Slowly but steadily,

more by insinuation than by compulsion, the edifice of the child's character will progress. If one will, he may teach the children how to adjust the blocks, but each little one must be its own builder, and the most effective help to this forming of the child's moral nature will be sympathetic, energetic, definite order."

And in following up this dominant note, recognized by the true teacher, another point psychologically of vast importance may be here insisted upon. Without going into the study of educational systems, their origin or their objects, it will not be difficult to find in many of our modern attempts at educational improvement dangers, grave because the element of danger is latent inasmuch as it seems to achieve easily and immediately what many take to be the sole object of an education. How often do we find this the guiding principle in school training—that a young mind must develop along the lines of a painless and unconscious evolution; that the child's mind must develop from within, must grow as the plant grows without over much interference on the part of its guide. All this seems very natural if we forget that man is a moral and not merely an intellectual being, and that he is not bringing out the fulness of human power when he follows the easiest road to what he deems success. We must not overlook the fact that education should first and foremost train, and training has as its very substance the overcoming obstacles. That character which guides conduct to true success is a disciplined character. It is not fitful, or wayward, or blown about by every wind of doctrine, or moved by every change of circumstance. Discipline involves standards. The application of standards implies rules. Is there not noticeable today the tendency to do

away with this concept of the teacher's task? How, then, is the essential quality in training, hard and constant application, to be conserved, if the teacher be urged to remove as far as possible all difficulties, to make everything easy, everything pleasant for the child?

Today, and it is true of innovators among ourselves, the strength of drudgery is not encouraged in the child. He virtually comes to his instructor with a bill of rights, saying, "You must not be dull, you must attract, you must please my attention. If you wish me to be virtuous, heroic, accomplished, you must make these things easy for me. Do not jar my inclinations or sensibilities while you are making the attempt." And the wise student of the child mind learns his lessons from the inexperience, the petulance, the unwisdom of childishness and proceeds to develop its waking faculties by methods that never rise above this same weakness.

But what after all can be the consequence of such a method? Briefly and clearly, a weakening of the mental fiber, a loss of genuine enthusiasm, failure to establish the invaluable habits of industry and application, and a lack of that moral steadfastness and fortitude in difficult undertakings which are the sure measure of every great and successful life. There must be, too, a loss of that broad interest in the affairs of others which helps so much to take the selfishness out of life and to make man appreciative of the work of others. Whenever we hear fine theories of easy discipline and easy methods for the young, we had better recall to mind the principle laid down by the common sense of ages: "There is no royal road to learning." Stamped upon every great achievement, conserved in every great thought that has given its

energy to the life of man, we shall find labor done and difficulties overcome. Men do not drift upwards and onwards: they climb.

Just one word in conclusion. I have refrained in this paper from touching upon those topics which affect most intimately the inner life and training of those whom we look upon as representatives and successors of Christ in the love He showed for little children. It was no mere oversight that occasioned this, nor was it any lack of reverent respect for the virtues which make the weary round of drudgery that belongs to the life of every teacher not merely tolerable but eagerly and gratefully accepted by the Catholic religious. I might have spoken of the submissive obedience that curbs one's passions, the pride, impetuosity and stubbornness that blind a man and lead him to take his own conceits for the infallible wisdom; I might have sketched the root principles of the authority every teacher must possess to do efficient work in the class-room and which rest chiefly in the power or influence over others derived from character, example and from mental and moral superiority; I might have touched upon the impartial spirit which moves the successful teacher to deal with strict fairness and justice to all, with no suggestion of undue familiarity so harmful to teacher and pupil alike and so ruinous to correct character formation; I might have dwelt upon the details, some foolishly call them trivial, that belong to discipline in the class-room and make for order without which no genuine training is possible; I might remind you of the need of that through which more things are wrought than the world dreams of, namely, prayer: earnest, constant prayer, since the Catholic teacher's work reaches out into

the supernatural and must be blessed and favored from on high if it is to enjoy the efficiency it seeks to attain; I might have dwelt upon all these and many other elements which enter into the fashioning of that admirable influence Catholic religious teachers possess in training and educating the youth committed to their care, but you will permit me to hold that insistence upon these topics were out of place here. They are the developments of the religious teacher's rule, of the life of enduring patience and sacrifice which rule entails, and it is at our *prie-dieu* with the image of the Master who has called us to His exalted service before our eyes that such lessons must be meditated. May it be the purpose of each one of us so to live that rule that long after the mere technical lessons taught our pupils have been lost in the crowding events of mature years, memory will still recall to them the vivid conception of what they ought to be as Christian men and women, learned from the example of a teacher revered and loved in their schooldays.

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