

The Parochial School: No Reason for Panic or Pessimism

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ADV 9436

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Recent vigorous criticism of the parochial school, voiced by a number of Catholics, forces all of us to re-examine the true worth of what has long been considered the most distinctive and valuable asset of the Church in the United States. Since the time when the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore wrote into our Church law the famous statute on Catholic education, the parish school has been commonly regarded as the necessary instrument for the preservation and development of the Catholic faith among our people. Every phase of our Catholic life has been profoundly affected by it. Few can doubt that the true strength of the Church in the United States has in large measure been the product of the parochial school system.

That this system, grown so rapidly from humble beginnings, has been far from perfect, we have all known very well. The great efforts made by religious teaching communities and diocesan agencies of supervision to improve and strengthen our schools bear witness

to our consciousness of their shortcomings. What concerns us, then, is not that the defects of these schools should be criticized; for that, if accompanied by constructive proposals for improvement, could be helpful. What causes us apprehension is that some of our own people should attack the very existence of the parochial schools as if they had become an unbearable burden, dragging the Church down, impeding her progress and preventing her from fulfilling her mission to the people of this country.

It is being said, for instance, that the quality of education in the parochial school is poor and that there is little or no hope of its improvement; that the supply of religious vocations within the teaching communities is dwindling to such an extent that religious teachers, who have made the schools possible and have given them their special character, will soon be greatly outnumbered by lay teachers; that the payment of a just wage to the latter and other rising costs of education are creating an unbearable financial burden for the Church generally and particularly for Catholic parents. It is, we are told, no longer necessary to bear this burden, since the once hostile attitude of American non-Catholics and the sectarian atmosphere of the public schools, which formerly made Catholic schools necessary, now no longer exist. With neutral public schools, recognition of full parental responsibility and its ex-

ercise, together with development of strong parochial units of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, are proposed as a substitute for the parochial school that, under present conditions, is in every way preferable. Finally, since the parochial school has been the product of the "state of siege" and "defense mentality"—clichés dear to our critics—and since they perpetuate the "Catholic ghetto," they are contrary to the new spirit of Catholic ecumenism. Hence their time is up, and they must go. This, I believe, is a fair statement of the opinion of present-day Catholic critics of our schools.

Quality of Education

The point of criticism that first demands our attention is that which is directed at the quality of parochial school education. If, indeed, the level of education given in Catholic schools were notably inferior to that offered in public schools, with little or no hope of improvement, then it would be difficult to justify the continued existence of the parochial school; for we could be quite sure that the quality of religious instruction would be no better than that maintained in other subjects.

Admittedly, it is difficult to make a fair comparison of two systems of education that vary so greatly from community to community. One study, however, with a relatively wide

base, giving the comparative results of public and parochial school education, was recently made by Robert H. Bauernfeind and Warren S. Blumfield and published in the Summer 1963 number of *Education and Psychological Measurement*.

This study gave the comparative performance of eighth-grade public and Catholic school students who took the Science Research Associates high school placement tests in 1959 and 1960. The 1959 tests, administered to 80,000 children of public schools and 60,000 of parochial schools, showed that the group from parochial schools scored a mean Grade Equivalent one year higher than the other sample. The 1960 tests, administered to 120,000 public school students and 100,000 from parochial schools, showed that the Catholic school students scored about one-half a year higher (0.45 to be exact) on their achievement tests in Language Arts, Arithmetic and Reading. The authors of the study conclude with the observation that it is important to note that these broad findings will not necessarily apply to any given local group of parochial school and public school children. "But on a national basis, circa 1960, Catholic school eighth-grade groups showed significantly higher levels of achievement in three curriculum areas than did public school eighth-grade groups." (Emphasis mine) I have not seen references to this study in any of the recent

criticism of the parochial school. This, it seems to me, is indicative of the level of competence of the critics if they did not know of such a study, or of their bias and prejudice if, knowing of it, they did not use it.

It may be argued that no matter what the quality of parochial school education may be, still the price that must be paid for it is beyond what our Catholic people are able to bear; or at least the anticipated results cannot possibly warrant the sacrifices required and the disadvantages entailed. The sacrifices and disadvantages are rightly attributed in large measure to the great disparity between the number of teaching sisters available and the needs of Catholic schools.

Shortage of Sisters

From the beginning, the development of the parochial school has depended above all on the communities of teaching sisters. Without them, the Catholic primary school program, as we have known it, would have been impossible. They still remain the key factor of the whole operation. It is well known, however, that in every diocese of the country there is a serious shortage of sisters, and that this dearth has been felt particularly in the past few years. One popular magazine has thus "ominously" stated the case: "During the year 1962 there was a decline of religious teachers in Catholic

schools in the number of 1,643, or 1.31 per cent." Put thus baldly, the prospect does indeed seem alarming. But the author of the article failed to mention some important factors that have brought about the present apparent decline.

Within the past few years, many religious communities—all the larger ones—have pledged themselves to send up to 10 per cent of their active sisters into the missions, especially to South America, where their services are needed even more than in the United States. Furthermore, up until the recent past, it was customary in many religious communities for young sisters to be assigned to classroom work while pursuing their higher studies in summer schools and in after-school classes. Now, however, it has everywhere been agreed that this was an unwise policy, dictated by the pressures of the moment. Not only have religious communities abandoned this procedure, but they have also withdrawn a considerable number of their sisters from teaching posts to permit them to advance their education and acquire postgraduate degrees as full-time students.

This new policy has caused certain gaps in existing staffs and a temporary interruption of the regular flow of teachers into classrooms. When this period of special stress has passed, we can expect a filling of the gaps and a resumption of the normal flow. Meanwhile, many communities are providing increased facilities

for religious formation and teacher training, clearly indicating that they have no doubt about future growth. With good programs of vocation recruitment, there is no reason to doubt that the future will see an increase in the number of teaching sisters. I do not mean that the supply will meet the demand in the foreseeable future; but the picture, I believe, is not nearly so dark as some have thought it necessary to paint it.

But though increase in religious vocations meets our highest expectations, still the parochial school will continue to be faced with grave financial problems. Catholic parents are seriously burdened with the double cost of education. One of our most important tasks is to see to it that they are relieved of this injustice. Perhaps relief in the form of tax credits or some kind of direct public aid to Catholic elementary and secondary education may not be so far away as it seemed a few years ago. The recent proposals regarding Federal aid to education and the prospect of yet another tax burden being imposed upon Catholic parents for exercising their natural and constitutionally guaranteed rights have alerted many to this injustice. As is well known, there has been a notable shift in the polls of opinion on this question. A growing number of those who had formerly expressed opposition to or doubt about the advisability of including Catholic schools in a program of Federal aid to educa-

tion are becoming convinced that some just measure of help is due parents of children in these schools. An increasing number of authorities on constitutional law openly affirm that there are no insuperable constitutional difficulties in the way of implementing these rights by tax credits or other means. There is, I believe, no reason why such a system of help as has been practiced for some time in England, Holland, Ireland, France and Canada, should not eventually be put into effect in the United States.

Such public help to the cause of parochial school education, however, may still be in the distant future. Meanwhile, the burden remains. But it is scarcely so great as to warrant either panic or pessimism. When we recall that our forefathers in their straitened circumstances brought into existence, developed and maintained the parochial school system, we can hardly believe that, in the greater affluence of the present, Catholic parents will be unwilling to make the sacrifices needed for their children's religious education.

Are Schools Needed?

But are these sacrifices really necessary? It is indeed true that the conditions that brought about the development of the parochial schools in the 19th century have greatly changed. We do not find the old anti-Catholic spirit, at least

not in its intense bitterness, in our present-day American society. The once dominant influence of sectarianism has disappeared from the public school. But can it be said that Catholic children can best receive their secular education in the public school, and that parental responsibility and the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine can be counted on to give them religious instruction and training?

All who are concerned in any way with religious education will readily admit that, with or without parochial schools, the fulfillment of parental responsibility is an essential factor in the religious development of the child. Without it very little can be accomplished. In individual cases, where for some reason Catholic schools have not been available, some parents, with the help they have received from the Church, have succeeded very well in the religious instruction and training of their children. But no one who has reflected on the subject will say that parents generally, without help, can be expected to fulfill this task.

Nor can it be said that the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine is an adequate substitute for the parochial school. Although its program, particularly as developed in this country, has proved remarkably effective in some places, yet in the nature of things it suffers from certain very serious limitations. In passing this judgment I speak from long personal experience. In the parish in which I was pastor for

many years and in the two dioceses in which I have carried the over-all responsibility, there was present in this field leadership—clerical, religious and lay—of a very high order. The program in each case was as strong, active and effective as circumstances seemed to permit. The results, all things considered, were, I believe, as good as could be expected. But in no case did the Confraternity prove an adequate substitute for Catholic education. It simply seemed impossible to reach and to hold many of the young people once they had arrived at the period of adolescence. And this seemed especially true in the larger centers of population. Nor was the program, with its hour or hour-and-a-half of religious instruction per week, truly adequate.

I would not have it inferred that I am belittling the importance of the Confraternity. On the contrary, with more than half our children in public schools, I consider it just as important as the parochial school and the Catholic high school—more important in the sense that it attempts to reach those who have most need of religious instruction, guidance and training. I am simply saying that the Confraternity is not an adequate substitute for religious education.

Our belief in the need for religious education, and hence for the Catholic school, derives from the very nature of education and from the impossibility of eliminating religious in-

struction and values from the school system without doing great harm to education itself. For the object of education is truth—the whole truth, in which religious truth occupies a pre-eminent place and exercises an integrating force. Christian education is just as deeply concerned with other aspects of truth as is any other educational system; but it has a deep and special concern for the religious teaching of the Christian revelation, part of which is contained in the Old Testament, handed down by Israel, God's chosen people of the Ancient Covenant.

An Essential Part

To exclude religious truth, the truth about man's origin in God and his ultimate destiny, is to truncate education. Our conviction that religious truths and values are an essential part of education will cause us to make the utmost effort to hold on to and develop Catholic education at all levels. It will never permit us to exclude those formative years of the elementary school, whatever may be the adjustments required to meet the special circumstances in certain localities.

The need for religious education, and hence for the parochial school, is every bit as acute now as it was in the past. For while the primary responsibility for the complete education of the child, including religious instruction and

training, remains with the parents and with the Church, yet modern social conditions make the task increasingly difficult for both. They need the help of the school. When, either voluntarily or under compulsion, the school eliminates religion from the curriculum, it actually impedes the task of both home and Church; for it all but marks religion as a subject that is unnecessary and even irrelevant. It leaves with students, parents and others the impression that religion is of little importance—even a detriment to the development of good citizenship and alert social consciousness. Indeed, countless Catholic parents, together with their fellow citizens of other religious faiths, are deeply concerned over the secularism and practical materialism that, in effect, is being forced upon public schools by recent court decisions. It is interesting to note that the rate of growth in non-Catholic religious schools in the past two decades has been greater than that in Catholic schools.

Foundation for Morality

One main defect of education emptied of religious content arises from the fact that religion forms the necessary foundation for morality. The great central truths of religion give the principles of morality their validity as moral law and their binding force in conscience. The elimination of religion from education is

bound, in the long run, to contribute to the weakening and even the undermining of those moral principles and standards which not only are imperative in the life of the individual but are also the foundation, the indispensable underpinning, of our country, our civilization and indeed of society itself. For this, history is our witness. In the words of George Washington: "Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."

If education by its very nature requires that religion form part of, and be integrated into, the curriculum of the schools, and if religious truth is the very foundation of morality, it is scarcely necessary to dwell at length on the argument that the Catholic school by its nature is contrary to the modern spirit of ecumenism. Both Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI have given the answer to such an argument in insisting that the movement for Christian unity can never be fostered at the expense of Christian truth, and that true ecumenism must be carefully distinguished from a false irenicism. Having said this, however, we hasten to add that our schools must be suffused by that renewed spirit of charity which has been the first fruit of the Second Vatican Council. In the past these schools have undoubtedly been affected by the unfriendly atmosphere in which they were born and through which they lived. They can continue to serve as effective instru-

ments of the Church only if they are animated by the Pentecostal spirit of the Council.

Other changes must take place in our schools if they are to remain a valuable tool of Catholic education. Already they enjoy one considerable advantage: while for the most part they have incorporated sound developments in educational psychology, they have not fallen victims to the so-called progressivism that has played so much havoc in modern elementary education. But now more than ever it is necessary that they keep abreast of every true advance in the field of pedagogy, particularly in training in the basic skills and in the presentation of the fundamentals of mathematics and the natural sciences. Especially they must be alert to important developments in the field of religious education. The liturgical reform, so dramatically inaugurated in the Second Vatican Council, undoubtedly calls for a new approach to religious instruction. Modern Catholic scripture scholarship and new theological insights are destined not to remain in the rarefied atmosphere of biblical criticism and theological speculation. They have profound implications for the whole field of religious education at every level. They offer unmeasured riches, interest and vitality for the presentation of the unchanging truths of Christian faith and Catholic teaching.

This new leaven of liturgical renewal, of scriptural study and of theological insight, to-

gether with our efforts to perfect both curriculum and teaching, should bring substantial improvement to parochial schools. These will not, however, solve all our problems. For some time, no doubt, we shall have to suffer patiently the barbs of criticism.

Difficulties

Some of our critics speak as if all problems and defects are found in the parochial school, passing over in silence the shortcomings of its public counterpart. It is true that, with the public treasury to draw upon, state schools do not face financial problems as serious as those that we have to meet. There are, however, some difficulties that they share with us. Others affect them in a special way. In some parts of the country there is said to be a shortage of public school teachers and a serious problem of keeping good teachers within particular systems. One great public school system of this country has been plagued with teachers' strikes and threats of strike. Boycotts by students and picketing by irate parents have threatened the peace and orderliness necessary to the schools. Problems of discipline and even instances of violence have received more than their share of publicity. And the problems arising from programs of integration can hardly be said to belong particularly to Catholic schools or to be confined to the schools of any one area.

Both the Catholic and the public schools are faced with serious problems in the performance of the essential task of giving their students the best education of which they are capable. They ought not to be looked on as rivals—certainly not as enemies. They are both here to stay. They will both continue to expand and develop. They should be friends and partners. In meeting their problems, each needs the co-operation and support of the other. It is only as friendly partners that they can enable the great system of American education to maintain its traditional diversity, to attain its greatest efficiency and to produce its best results. Criticism, on the part of some Catholics, aimed at the elimination of the parochial school may cause us additional problems. It will serve a good purpose, however, if it spurs us to remove as soon as possible every cause of justifiable complaint.

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