

We have to decide whether or not to treat the Catholic school as the eighth sacrament of the Church; there has been an undeniable tendency in the past to regard it as necessary to salvation. Nobody, so far as I know, has actually taught that it works *ex opere operato* but we have often behaved as though we believed this. Our resources and our energies have been directed to making sure that a school functions; we have been a lot less concerned about how it carries on its work and a lot less concerned about possible other ways of doing what the school is supposed to do. These thoughts are the results of reading an admirable report on *The Future of Catholic Education* prepared by Anthony Spencer for the Catholic Renewal Movement.¹ Those Catholics, if they exist, who are not concerned about the state of our religious education should still read this booklet as a model of how to deal coolly with an emotional topic, how to criticize Church authorities and others without rancour and how to clarify a confused situation.

The Report begins with an analysis of the Vatican II *Declaration on Christian Education* and notes a possible conflict between two sets of norms provided by that document. On the one hand is the principle 'Parents have the first and inalienable duty and right to educate their children . . . they should enjoy true freedom in their choice of schools' and on the other hand 'Catholic parents have a duty to entrust their children to Catholic schools when and where this is possible'. Presumably Catholic schools came into existence because at some time they were seen by Catholic parents as the normal means of implementing their free choice concerning the education of their children. Nevertheless it is at least possible that in the judgement of particular parents the Catholic school will not give their children the Catholic education they need. This certainly cannot be ruled out *a priori*. In such a case it seems clear that the general norm about entrusting your children to Catholic schools must give way. The end is of more importance than any particular means.

The *Declaration* provides certain standards by which to judge a school: it speaks of 'zealous attention to moral and religious education', of teachers 'performing their services as partners of the parents', of collaboration between Catholic schools and others. It is plain that if there were a Catholic school in which little attention had been paid to the results of modern research in catechetics it could hardly be called 'zealous' in its attention to religious education; if, again, it emphasized docility and conformity at the expense of growth in responsibility it could not be thought of as zealous in moral education. If, in our country, it did not have an effective Parent Teacher Association it would not fulfil the Council's demand for 'partnership'. If its education were 'segregated' in the sense that

¹Obtainable from Alan Johnson, 132 Abbots Road, Abbots Langley, Watford, Herts., WD5 0BL (27½p post free).

it tended to exclude the children from the general cultural and social life of the country, it would not be 'collaborating', in the sense required by the Council. Plainly only the most irresponsible of parents would regard their duty to their children as fulfilled by sending them to such a school. Of course, it might be better than anything else available, but that is a matter for careful investigation.

The question, however, is not simply one of guiding the conscience of individual families. There is also a question for the Church as a whole. If it turns out that denominational schools are a relatively inefficient way of providing for Catholic education then we have to ask about the allocation of our resources. Should we spend nearly all our educational funds on these schools if they could be better spent elsewhere? There are 800,000 children in Catholic schools but there are also about 400,000 Catholic children in other schools; we do not, however, allot even one-third of our funds to caring for these latter in spite of the Council's clear instruction that 'To those large number of the Church's children who are being trained in schools that are not Catholic, she needs to be present with her *special affection and helpfulness*'.

Those who propose to send their children to non-Catholic schools on the grounds that they will receive a better education are open to the charge that they are opting for the bourgeois values of our society rather than for the gospel. This may, in some cases, be true, but the charge would be more convincing if Catholic schools characteristically produced young people prepared to challenge the world intelligently in terms of the gospel. This is by no means evident; it is even suggested that the high proportion of middle-class children who are not Catholics but who attend certain convent schools have been sent there precisely because the opposite is the case.

Those who leave the Church in protest are frequently condemned on the grounds that constructive criticism from within is more effective than attacks from without. What is true of the Church is perhaps equally true of our world. The challenge of the gospel can never be effectively issued from a safe distance. If they are to fulfil the mission entrusted to them at their baptism, our children must not be segregated from the rest of the world, but enabled to bring to it the fire of their love. It is not at all clear that our schools are the best way of bringing this about—rather than, say, one or more of the twelve other means of education listed in this Report. But the real problem is that we simply do not know enough about how valuable our schools are. Such research as has been done is not favourable to them, but the first need is for more facts. If in fact our scarce resources are used in maintaining unnecessary schools and thereby thousands of children are deprived of the Christian education they need, then we are explicitly warned that a better thing to do with our bricks and mortar would be to tie them round our necks and make for the sea.

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