

SOME ASPECTS OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION¹

WE hold as Catholics that the truths of our faith should be the basis and life-giving principle of our ideas and judgments and actions in every department of our lives, and that nothing should be excluded from the all-inclusive influence of that principle. I had not been teaching very long before I began to be conscious that, as in the life of ordinary Catholics in the world, so in school life, there were often two distinct areas. One area was an explicitly Catholic area, in which Christian standards were fully realized and fully applied; but there was another area, and in school this was chiefly covered by what are termed the secular studies, where Christian standards were not indeed denied, but either not applied at all or only applied occasionally at certain isolated points where their non-application would have been glaringly apparent. At other less prominent points our standards of judgment were not really Christian at all, but those of the world around us. In other words, we were not living the Christian life integrally; the principles of the faith were not penetrating into and informing every idea and judgment in every department of our lives; and in consequence we were producing characters, forming personalities, that were all-unconsciously divided in allegiance, in the service of two masters, ruled in part by Christian principles, but in part either without definite standards of any kind or ruled by standards that were not Christ's and that in the last analysis were quite irreconcilable with Christ's law. The result of this was that the lives of those who went out from the school to take up their careers and professions were apt to follow one of three courses: either the christianized area of their lives extended its boundaries under pressure of the circumstances of the outside world, and thus absorbed the other area; in which case very much that had been allowed to be taken as a

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matter of course at school had to be unlearned and re-learned in the light of Christian principles; or the two areas maintained a relative equilibrium, and the person in question remained in an inconsistent state of divided allegiance, largely unconscious, though often resulting in a crippling tension which excluded any kind of active apostolate for the faith and had a paralysing effect on the spiritual life; or, again under pressure of the circumstances of the outside world, the de-christianized area already present at school, extended its boundaries and absorbed the other area—the result being at best a more or less nominal adhesion to religion, and at worst, complete apostasy.

I do not think any thoughtful person with a knowledge of the present state of our Catholic education will deny the presence of these two areas, though there may be wide difference of opinion as to the causes which lie behind their existence and as to the relative size of each. What follows is an attempt to estimate those causes, and the relative size of those areas; to see what obstacles lie in the way of the increase of the one and the reduction of the other, with a view ultimately to its complete elimination; to suggest what measures can be taken to effect this transformation, both at present and in the future, and to forecast what effect the taking of those measures would have upon the shape of the Catholic education of the future.

It is a truism to say that education is not merely the imparting of knowledge or even of culture; it is the formation of character and the building up of personality. Culture is the material of this building-up; religion is its formative power; and religion must penetrate into the whole of life and unify it in God. For a Christian, the only true building up of character and personality is that building up which is the formation in the individual of the likeness and character of Christ. Whatever the culture be that is the material used in this building, it must receive a Christ-like quality, be judged and used or rejected according to Christian standards and with a Christian sense of values. For culture in its widest sense is the perfection of human life, and human life

cannot be perfect except in so far as it is transformed by Christ, who entered our life and identified Himself with it in order to redeem it. Every element that human culture can produce is capable of this transformation, and must be so transformed if it is to play its part in the building up of Christian characters and personalities into a Christian society. This is Christ-centred and Christ-ruled humanism. Any element of human culture that is produced or viewed or used apart from Christ is to that extent defective, and belongs to an autonomous, self-sufficient humanism, essentially un-Christian. St. Paul condemns this as he lays down the foundation principle of Christian humanism when he says, "Let no man therefore glory in men. For all things are yours, whether it be Paul, or Apollo, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come: for all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's." (I Cor. iii, 22.)

It follows that a really Christian culture will be one that is the product of a Christian philosophy of life, and that every branch of such a culture, business and recreation, the arts and sciences, politics and social life, will be penetrated and formed by this philosophy. A society wholly Christian would produce such a culture spontaneously, hardly conscious, as it were, that it was doing so; but in England to-day we do not live in a society wholly Christian. It is still basically Christian, and it still retains many positively Christian elements, but it is in process of transformation, and the chief means by which it is being transformed is our English educational system, the predominant influence in which is an anthropocentric humanism which, though it often uses the language of Christianity and adopts or adapts certain of its ethical postulates, is none the less fundamentally anti-Christian because it denies by implication the existence of revealed truth. While still believing, then, that our Catholic education, if it is to be also an English education, must bring us into vital contact with the whole range of English culture, we ought not to accept any manifestation of that culture that is presented to us, still less should we

acquiesce in the system which presents it, without first subjecting them to a very searching criticism in the light of Christian principles.

In fact, of course, as everybody knows, we have accepted, during the last thirty years, both the system and the material of the culture it presents, entire and almost without criticism, so that it is true to say that to-day our Catholic schools as far as the matter taught and the methods of teaching go, differ not at all from their non-Catholic counterparts. This is not the place to argue whether this acceptance was necessary in the circumstances, whether it was forced upon us or could have been avoided, nor whether the results of its acceptance could have been foreseen. Our main concern at the moment is to examine what those results have been. Catholic schools do, of course, differ widely from non-Catholic schools on account of their Catholic spirit, which is as a rule intense and alive, a spirit derived from the Catholic life based on faith and grace, which is lived in them. But this Catholic spirit, strong as it is, cannot in the nature of the case penetrate into those areas of school life where a course of studies imposed from outside by a non-Catholic authority holds the field. The result of this is that nearly all the literary subjects of the school curriculum which should form the basis of a thoroughly christianized culture must be taught according to a syllabus and in view of an external examination system which rob them almost entirely of the possibility of fulfilling their function. What makes the matter worse, the examination system itself is an inherently vicious one, calculated to empty the subjects taught of all but the slightest cultural value, and to do much to deaden the intellectual sensitivity and critical powers of all who have to undergo them. This is a sweeping charge; it concerns two distinct things: the imposed syllabus, and the examination system, though in practice these are closely connected. I will attempt some justification of each charge. I will take the imposed syllabus first. As they stand to-day, the School Certificate syllabuses of all the examination boards make it impossible to teach English or History, basic

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subjects in the educational scheme, in such a way as to give them any but the slightest cultural value. Still less is it possible that thus taught they should form the basis of a genuine Catholic culture.

I have said that the study of history is a basic subject in any educational scheme. An education that is professedly Christian, and designed to give a Christian culture, must teach Christian history. In other words, in such historical teaching, the Incarnation must be the centre to which all that came before leads up, and from which all that comes after it flows. The history that is taught in a Catholic school should therefore be world history in terms of the Incarnation and the Christian gospel. It should be wide in its scope, comparative, landmarked by events and dates, and not overburdened with detail. Historical reading should be encouraged to fill in the background at points which specially interest the individual. Most boys take to historical reading like ducks to water provided the right books are put into their hands, as soon as they begin to realise the general sweep of history as a whole. In this study the historical scriptures of the Old Testament should find their place. At present, my experience is that Catholic boys have often imbibed enough of the semi-educated atmosphere that surrounds them, and which both they and their parents absorb from the religious discussions in the daily papers, to be more than half inclined to regard the historical portions of the Old Testament as a collection of useless and rather pointless myths, with responsibility for which the Church has, for some inscrutable reason, been saddled. The only cure for this false and dangerous attitude is clear teaching concerning Hebrew methods of writing history, and a systematic attempt to place the history of the chosen people in its true setting in world history. Yet the unfortunate school-master who attempts to plan a programme of this kind finds his ideals almost entirely impracticable on account of the time demand of his externally imposed syllabus. Here he is confronted each year with a section of English or European history for study, which presupposes, if it is to

serve any intelligent purpose, a comparatively detailed knowledge on the part of the pupil of the general background of the whole of English and European history such as might be fairly expected from an undergraduate in his second or third year at the university. The section itself (say 1066-1485, or 1714-1850) must be studied in great detail. The pupil must know all about the Constitutions of Clarendon, and where Prestonpans is and what happened there. He must have views on Investitures, and know technical details of strategy and tactics. The result is that the whole process of teaching history tends to become a stuffing with unrelated facts and readymade views. A boy with a good memory may get 70 per cent.; but a fortnight after the examination most of what he has learned fades from his mind because it has only made a temporary memory-impression there, and the result often is that at the end of four or five years he knows no history whatever, but retains a hearty dislike of the whole subject. Here is an area of school life, then, which at present is excluded from the Christian culture which Catholic education designs to build up, and where Christian standards of judgement are not being inculcated. The ordinary Catholic boy on leaving school has no conception of the Christian interpretation of history. He hears false interpretations on all sides in the world outside, and he has no equipment with which to meet them, and often no conception that they can be met. If he is intelligent, as he very often is, this may be a great source of danger to his faith.

What has been said concerning the study of history in our schools applies almost more radically to the study of English. The primary purpose of the study of English is the study of words, their meaning and use, as instruments with which to express ideas. The material of this study should be a wide range of the best English literature, and the approach to it should be by way of appreciative criticism directed to the discovery of what the ideas are which the words express, and how they are used to express those ideas. The study of English on these lines should begin in

the lowest form, should be continuous throughout the school, should consist of grammar combined with the critical study of texts, together with every encouragement to creativity in the expression of ideas. This study would be the basis on which all other studies, classics, modern languages, history, and even mathematics and science, should be built up; and it should result in the fostering and growth of sensitivity in the perception of ideas and a keenly critical appreciation of the force of words in expressing them. Again, the unlucky schoolmaster who dreams of a programme such as this, is confronted by an imposed syllabus which compels him to teach his pupils far too many subjects, leaving him a minimum of time and leisure for any real study of this basic subject, which then further insults him by choosing for him texts which he would never dream of choosing himself, and finally compels him, if the examination is to be passed, to spend his time priming his pupils with isolated facts and standardized opinions about them. Is it surprising that sensitivity and awareness are blunted, the faculty of critical appreciation dulled, development arrested, and that we tend to turn out a type easily duped by bogus ideas, bogus sentiment, bogus systems? Here again we have an area of school life dominated by values and standards largely false, which is in no way integrated nor, as things are at present organized, capable of integration into what should be a wholly Christ-centred life, producing a completely Christian culture. I have spoken only of English and history as the two basic subjects in the educational scheme, and the strictures I have made apply principally to them. But what is true of them is true in some measure also of the classics and of modern languages, especially in the literary rather than the grammatical sphere.

When we turn to consideration of the examination system itself we find that it simply ministers to, and stereotypes, the evils of the externally imposed syllabus. There are in England and Wales at least six examining boards, and each examines every year several thousands of candidates. This means that every examiner, e.g., in English, must correct

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in the course of three or four weeks some three hundred to four hundred scripts. It is clearly impossible in these circumstances to assess the real value of the candidate's knowledge and capacity, and more especially in a subject such as English or history where there can be wide variety in methods of treatment and points of view. The means adopted, therefore, is that of a "detailed scheme of marking, which takes account of the several markable points in each question, and of common errors in the answers." (The School Certificate Examination; being the Report of the Panel of Investigators appointed . . . to inquire into the School Certificate examination. H.M. Stationery Office, 1932.) The result is obvious. Anything outside the settled scheme of markable points simply does not count; the examiner must work against time. "The only markable points which are both recognizable at a glance and sufficiently objective to ensure uniformity amongst a panel of examiners are facts and standardized opinions. The effect of this in determining the type of paper set and therefore in determining the practice of the schools should not require much demonstration" (see *Scrutiny of Examinations*, L. C. Knights, in *Scrutiny*, Sept. 1933, where the whole problem is dealt with at length.)

Every Catholic schoolmaster is well aware of the tremendous influence of home life in the building up of a boy's character. If the religious influence of the home is strong and of the right kind, solid and not mere sentimental, and particularly if the home possesses a real Catholic culture of its own, the evils wrought by the defects of this educational scheme are largely negative, the area of school life which it covers remains neutral and even perhaps under the influence of the Catholic culture of the home begins to be critically examined, and given, to some extent at least, a Christian orientation. But not by any means all our boys come from such homes. In many cases the same influences which are weakening the integrity of the Christian life and culture of our schools, intensified and made more pervasive by the immediate contact of semi-pagan surroundings, have

also weakened and perhaps almost destroyed it in the homes of the boys. Where this is the case, the area of school life covered by the educational scheme does not remain neutral ground. It may begin to be polarized by ideas and ideals that are either worldly in the selfish and self-regarding sense, or which belong to systems of thought such as communism, the superficial idealism of which is attractive, especially to the young, while its fundamental philosophy is not seriously faced. This shows itself in the first place in a certain restiveness under the restrictions and hardness of the requirements of the Christian life, and in the second, in a vague feeling of irritation at the Church for being as is supposed reactionary and behind the times. What I have said in regard to the ideas and ideals of communism I hold to be equally true of Fascism, though it seems possible to-day to be a Fascist without feeling that one is in any way holding principles irreconcilable with those of the Church. In proportion as the area of school life covered by the educational scheme ceases to be neutral and becomes polarized by any of these ideas, a tension is set up between it and specifically Christian area. A half conscious, half unconscious conflict of loyalties ensues. When the boy leaves school and takes up his career in the world outside, this tension is greatly increased, and before long a more or less definite decision will have to be made. Much of the leakage among those educated in secondary schools; much nominal practice of religion, is explicable in these terms.

If then the main lines of the thesis I have put forward are true, it will be obvious that the most urgently necessary reform in Catholic education is to break free from the domination of the imposed syllabus and the external examining board. But this step is not yet possible, because Catholics themselves are not yet ready for it. One of the first things most Catholic parents ask when choosing a school for their child is: What public examinations do you take? Will he be able to take matriculation in due course? This is quite natural. The entry to a great many jobs in the business world is dependent on the possession of a school or matricu-

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lation certificate. No professional examination can be taken without one or the other, and a matriculation certificate is a *sine qua non* of a university course. A headmaster who replied blandly that he did not believe in the School Certificate and would not have it in his school would very soon have to close down. There is, however, a growing body of opinion, both among Catholics and among non-Catholics, in favour of a radical change in the examination system, while in the educational world itself there is widespread dissatisfaction with it. One of the primary functions of Catholic Action ought to be a searching criticism of the whole conception of education in the light of Catholic principles, and out of that criticism a reconstructed education should emerge. As parents come into contact with this criticism it is to be hoped that an increasing number will be prepared to put their principles into action and consent to allow their children to be educated according to a system which ignores the School Certificate altogether. This does not necessarily involve a complete contracting out of the educational system of the country. To contract out completely even if it were possible would be most unwise at a time when educational opinion is in a very fluid state, and when in consequence Catholic educationists, if they will apply their principles and use their influence to the utmost, may be able to guide and shape it considerably. The Higher Certificate, though it suffers from some of the vices of the School Certificate, is not entirely hopeless as the ultimate stage in an education which is integrally Christian. A school which could plan its own syllabus up to the age of 16, and then spend the last two years in educating for the Higher Certificate, though it would not be working under entirely ideal conditions, would at any rate be able to overcome many of the disabilities which are forced upon it by being compelled to take the School Certificate.

We have already begun at Laxton¹ a scheme of this kind, with the consent of a few individual parents. In time we hope to get rid of the School Certificate altogether. The

¹ i.e., at Blackfriars School, Laxton, Stamford.

whole scheme of studies could then be recast, making a wide study of English and its cognate subjects, history and geography, the basis of the education given, and adding to this classics, mathematics, modern languages or science or a combination of these according to the bent and capacity of the individual boy. Meanwhile for the majority the School Certificate, with its attendant evils, remains for the time the normal educational course. What can be done to circumvent these evils? Here I believe lies the chief value of a small school such as ours. For Laxton is a very distinctively Dominican school, a school which impresses on its boys a Dominican character and outlook. It is primarily a family, and if it grew beyond its present dimensions (60 boys and 8 Fathers) it would cease to be that. It seeks to reproduce within itself as far as possible the main elements of ideal family life, wise authority and guidance, combined with freedom for the development of individual character. In a family the children receive their formation by close association with their parents, and with each other in the give and take of the home circle. In this atmosphere religion and life come into intimate contact, penetrate each other and grow together naturally. The maintenance of this family spirit in a school is only possible where small numbers make close association between Fathers and boys natural and spontaneous. This is our most valuable characteristic, and one which I think markedly distinguishes us from most other schools. There are no artificial distinctions, Fathers and boys, and older and younger boys, live in the complete equality of community life, difference of function being the only recognized distinction. By this means much of our education is done out of school by social contacts between Fathers and boys. This smallness and intimacy helps also to solve many problems. In the family atmosphere class distinctions, minute or otherwise, disappear, and such abnormal developments as over-organization of games and sports and the worship of athleticism with its consequent contempt for ability of other kinds are unknown. It helps the psychologically abnormal boy to find his proper

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level, and rids him gradually of his inhibitions. It helps the backward boy because owing to the smallness of the classes he can receive in school a measure of individual attention and out of it, a good deal of help and encouragement. Everything is done to eliminate the spirit of competition. There are no weekly marks, and no prizes. It helps to solve the problem of sex instruction, because a boy instinctively imbibes a proper attitude to it from the atmosphere in which he lives. He accepts explicit instruction upon it as natural, and is not as a rule in any way afraid to talk to one of the Fathers about any difficulties he may experience. The family atmosphere also makes the giving and receiving of religious instruction a wholly spontaneous and informal matter. Such instruction is made as unlike class matter as possible, and is never the subject of examinations. Yet it occupies the place of honour in the curriculum, the first period of each morning, and as a rule has as many periods assigned to it as the most important secular subject. We try as far as possible to teach Christian doctrine in terms of life, and to present the faith as something to be lived, both by the individual and by the whole community of school, family, nation and civilization. It is here that the social implications of religion are emphasized. The surest way in these days to secure that religion is something more than a mere framework, something that grips the life of a boy and strikes its roots deep down into his being, is to show him through the study of the social problems of the modern world that religion does not cover one particular area of life only, but reaches the whole of life and every part of it. In the family atmosphere too the worship of God, daily Mass and Compline, takes on the character less of a burden to be borne than of an obligation, difficult no doubt at times, but integral to the life of the community, which shares it in common and makes it a common offering to God. Here again we aim at developing spontaneity and independence. Daily Compline, lasting a quarter of an hour, is the only compulsory service; and this is regarded as the community night prayers. Boys settle their own time for

confession, and to whom they go, and they are free to stay in bed till breakfast if they wish to do so a certain number of times a week, and they can please themselves which days they choose, provided they register their names in a book the evening before. The ideal, then, which Laxton sets before itself is to educate its boys in such a way that they are trained to view the whole of their lives and every influence in contemporary life which bears upon their lives from a Christian standpoint, to judge these things by Christian standards, and with a Christian sense of values. Since this integral Christian education is given by Dominicans it will bear upon it the impress of the Dominican character and view of life which is pre-eminently apostolic. Thus we aim at producing men not only trained to know the truth but prepared to practise it, and by practising it to do the work of apostles in a world that greatly needs the apostolic spirit.

The present time is one of great importance. Educational freedom is an ideal cherished by the best elements in English life at the moment, yet educational opinion is in a very uneasy state, beginning to question many of the assumptions which it has hitherto taken for granted, and uncertain whither it is tending. Now is the time for the impact on it of the full weight of a united Catholic opinion, strong in the belief in the truth of its own principles and determined to put them into force. The introduction of an independent Catholic scheme of education producing a real Catholic culture in the surroundings of English society would have immense influence in bringing about the overthrow of the mechanization that is on the way to killing all that is best in English education. If we do not make our influence felt now, the time may come before very long when we shall be deprived even of the small amount of autonomy that we now enjoy.

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