

HOME AND SCHOOL CO-OPERATION IN SEX EDUCATION¹

SISTER JOSEPH OF THE INCARNATION, S.N.D.

The Problem

THE system of sex education which we have worked out during the past seven years in our school, an all-Catholic day grammar school for girls in the centre of a great city, is an attempt to ensure that each of our pupils has the right kind of enlightenment on the sacred mysteries of life.

From the school's viewpoint this is an obvious necessity. Girls have to be prepared for the naturalistic outlook of the world around home and school on sex, love, purity and marriage, which threatens the sanctity of the home. For this they must understand the full significance of and derive the full benefit from the religious and moral training given in school, especially on the sixth and ninth commandments and the sacrament of matrimony—a difficult, if not impossible, objective without proper preliminary sex enlightenment.

Experience showed us that many girls were not so enlightened because, for one reason or another, their mothers could not give them the necessary help. However, as advice offered to mothers who requested it was always gratefully received, we thought that some general scheme of assistance would be both welcome to parents and beneficial to their daughters. But what could we do?

The Church's Directives

To answer this question we sought the Church's guidance in the documents at our disposal, and found certain fundamental principles.

Firstly, the initiation of children into the sacred mysteries of life is an integral part of their religious and moral education and must never be dissociated from it.

Sex education is not a subject on its own or part of a course in biology, physiology, hygiene or homecraft: that is the naturalistic approach which starts at the wrong end. The approach must be supernatural, beginning with God and founded on religion.

¹ A paper read at a conference of headmistresses held at Spode House in January 1959.

Instruction should stress the spiritual and moral aspect of sex education, bringing home to the child's mind the noble purpose for which God created marriage and made it a sacrament. It should take into account that man is both fallen and redeemed, for, as Pius XI pointed out, 'every method of education founded wholly or partly on the denial or forgetfulness of original sin and grace, and relying solely on the powers of human nature, is unsound' (*Christian Education of Youth*, 31.12.29).

Control of the sex function is essentially a moral matter and so never achieved by instruction alone. 'Care must be taken . . .', continued Pius XI, 'to give the youth of each sex a full, sound, uninterrupted religious education. They must be carefully taught to be instant in prayer, to make frequent use of the sacraments of penance and the holy eucharist, to cultivate filial devotion to the blessed Virgin, mother of purity, entrusting themselves entirely to her care, to avoid dangerous reading, indecent shows, immoral conversations and all other occasions of sin.'

Secondly, the sex enlightenment of a child as part of its formation in virtue is primarily the parents' responsibility.

Parents have the fundamental and inalienable natural right to educate and direct the education of their children. For this they have the graces of the sacrament of marriage. They are therefore best fitted by both nature and grace to watch individual needs and make use of appropriate occasions for enlightening their children. As Pius XII told Catholic mothers: 'With the discretion of a mother and of a teacher, and thanks to the open-hearted confidence with which you have been able to inspire your children, you will not fail to watch and discern the moment in which certain unspoken questions have occurred to their minds and are troubling their senses. It will then be your duty to your daughters, the fathers' to your sons, carefully and delicately to unveil the truth as far as it appears necessary to give a prudent, true, and Christian answer to these questions and set their minds at rest' (*Allocution*, 28.10.41). If parents do this their children will naturally turn to them in any difficulty, problem or trouble of this nature.

When parents cannot do what Pius XII recommended others may act for them. As the hierarchy of England and Wales stated in their joint pastoral, 'there will, unfortunately, always be some parents who neglect their obvious duties towards their children, and whose omissions call for attention by someone else. In such

cases the teacher or experienced youth leader, animated by Christian charity and having the necessary competence, may be the best person to make up the deficiency, but it is advisable that the approval of the parents is always sought. . . . Teachers must always respect the rights and wishes of parents . . . and rather than taking on parental duties should regard it as their task to help parents towards the proper fulfilment of their obligations' (21.4.44).

Thirdly, the initiation should be adapted to the needs of the individual child.

Children are different and in this connection require personal consideration. There is no general rule about the age at which instruction should begin or be completed. As Pius XII pointed out in the words quoted, parents need to keep a watchful eye on the child to be ready to meet reasonable questions and to give the amount of information which the child's development and environment require. Certain simple truths can be taught after the age of reason. Many theologians think that the facts of life should be presented not much before and not much after puberty, as it is likely that any child may acquire information elsewhere after this stage.

The instruction should be truthful; not necessarily the whole truth but sufficient to satisfy the child's curiosity and needs. Pius XII urged: 'Do not give them wrong ideas or wrong reasons for things: whatever their questions may be, do not answer them with evasions or untrue statements which their minds rarely accept, but take occasion from them lovingly and patiently to train their minds which only want to open to the truth . . .'

Initiation in the physiology of sex should always be private, never public, to children or adolescents. As the members of our hierarchy pointed out in the pastoral already mentioned, 'class or group instruction of children or youth in the physiological aspects of sex would be fraught with grave dangers and would be against the traditional teaching of the Church'.

Altogether the Catholic tradition, hallowed by the wisdom and experience of twenty centuries, is one of education to purity. But as the Church is universal she lays down general instructions, leaving us to relate them, subject to her approval, to our own particular requirements and circumstances.

The Solution

Applying these principles to our needs, our solution of the problem was a graded series of booklets of sex instruction in its religious setting, for mothers to use with their daughters at home, correlated in content with the relevant parts of our religion course in such a way that scriptural, doctrinal and moral issues are considered at school after the preliminary private instruction has been assimilated.

The booklets were compiled by selecting graded instructions from an existing manual so as to form stages of initiation for girls of the lower, middle and upper forms. These were tried out experimentally and the suitability of their contents confirmed by the mothers. The original series thus formed is being replaced gradually by our own *My Dear Daughter* series, written with the assistance of members of staff, mothers of pupils and other expert advisers. Ultimately there will be two booklets and a book. The first two, tried out in typescript for two to three years, have now been printed for private circulation.

At suitable stages of the religion course, in the first, third and fifth years, a letter is sent to the mothers requesting them to instruct their daughters in sex according to age and development, helped, if they so desire, by the booklets. Mothers can obtain these at a private interview in school or by post, by hand or, very recently, by purchase. Almost all the mothers borrow the booklets, taking them when offered, but a few ask for them beforehand or afterwards, according to the relative maturity or immaturity of their daughters. They use them in various ways: a few frame their own instructions with the help of the booklets, most read and discuss the contents with their daughters, some give the booklets to the girls to read privately.

The Scheme

Here are *the main stages of spiritual and moral enlightenment* which our girls should normally get during their years with us through the correlation of booklets at home and religion course at school. Obviously these matters, which are necessarily isolated in this synthesis for special consideration, are always merged in their general religious background.

At the meeting which precedes the admission of *first year pupils* parents are given a full explanation of the system. In the first term the first booklet, *My Dear Daughter—a Mother talks to Young*

Girls, is available for mothers to use. This booklet prepares girls for entry into adolescence by presenting our Lady as ideal and model of girlhood, womanhood and motherhood, together with instructions on purity, modesty and hygiene, thus giving a reverent introduction to sex matters. During some subsequent religion lessons casual reference is made to the contents of the booklet in connection with the liturgical year, the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity in the soul by grace, baptism, the fall, confession and holy communion.

During the *second year* further opportunities for alluding to the contents of the booklet occur in religion lessons on, for example, the life of our Lord and our Lady, especially the incarnation, the visitation and the nativity.

In Lent of the *third year* the second booklet, *My Dear Daughter—a Mother talks to Girls*, is borrowed by nearly all the mothers. Reading and discussion of this at home should give a deeper and more ordered knowledge and understanding of the subject matter of the first booklet, which is developed more fully in the second one as introduction to its main purpose. This is instruction on the co-operation of husband and wife with God in his work of creation, the sacrament of marriage and the virtues of purity and modesty in relation to adolescents. From this stage onwards there is a deliberate connection between booklets and lessons, but without public acknowledgment of the fact. During the summer term the religion course includes instruction on the sixth and ninth commandments, stressing their positive aspect, and on conscience, temptation and sin, grace and the sacrament of penance. Throughout, there is reference to the special problems of girls of their age and environment, with emphasis on the importance of prayer, the fervent reception of the sacraments and devotion to our Lady, in the building up of a sound spiritual life.

During the *fourth year* other spiritual and moral matters, connected with the general theme, are developed in full in class. At the beginning of the year vocation, the religious life and the vow of chastity are considered as spiritual marriage with Christ and the extension of the spiritual motherhood of our Lady in one of the religious families of the Church. After Christmas the systematic study of the sacrament of marriage brings up again, after a year's interval, the issues referred to in the second booklet together with instruction on the building up of a happy and

successful marriage and home. In May a course of lessons on our Lady has, as one of its aims, the fostering of devotion to her as ideal and model of girlhood and womanhood.

In the second term of the *fifth year* mothers usually borrow a third booklet. The one in present use is not our own, so until ours is ready we recommend, to parents and teachers who ask, some of the publications on the subject. Our final book of the *My Dear Daughter* series is planned to contain all that an intelligent and sensible Catholic girl of about sixteen should know before leaving school about the management of herself, and her responsibility for others, in matters of purity and modesty and in remote preparation for marriage.

Sixth form girls, in alternate years, take Part II of the higher religious certificate course. They therefore make a thorough study of the sacrament of matrimony and of the Christian family and home. This amplifies what has been learned previously through booklets, lessons, instructions, retreats and personal guidance. All these means help to provide the necessary knowledge and ability to discuss questions and solve problems relating to sex and marriage which the girls are likely to meet, probably while still at school but certainly after they leave.

The Advantages

It is now possible, after about seven years of experience in the working of the system, to assess, to some extent, its value to those most concerned.

The parents have expressed their views in about seven hundred letters written since the introduction of the scheme. These record appreciation of the booklets, of their use as a medium of instruction and of their link with the school religion course. Mothers are grateful for a simple way of accomplishing a difficult duty, for the closer contacts with their daughters and for the benefit to the girls of proper instruction and adequate preparation for the future.

The girls have only been asked their opinions casually, when returning borrowed booklets, lest undue importance should seem to be attached to the subject. In the early days of the project many said that the booklets had answered questions and solved problems for them. Later these statements were made less frequently, perhaps because the use of the booklets anticipated many needs and most of the wrong initiation. All were enthusiastic, particu-

larly those who have benefited by the full course of booklets with instruction. Sixth form girls think that the first year is the most important in that the right foundation is laid at the outset. Leavers have not been asked their views systematically, but several have expressed their appreciation of the help which has enabled them to deal with the problems of their new environment.

Members of staff consider that, in providing introductory matter to class instruction and discussion, the booklets are an indispensable adjunct to effective religious teaching, especially in the third, fourth and sixth forms. The mistresses are aware that the girls have the private knowledge on which class teaching is based, and the girls can understand the purpose of their lessons. Relevant scriptural, dogmatic and moral matters can be presented and considered sensibly, without strain or tension on either side.

In consequence the girls should acquire a high ideal of marriage, motherhood and fatherhood, an appreciation of the wisdom of God's laws of marriage and their protection by the sixth and ninth commandments, a respect for the virtues of purity and modesty, a realization of the sacredness of the human body and the dignity of the human person, an insight into the mysteries of the infancy of our Lord and the privileges of our Lady. They should therefore be better equipped with solutions to problems relating to these matters, especially problems of behaviour.

In addition, the secular subjects of the curriculum benefit. For example, in biology the attitude to sex and reproduction is detached and matter-of-fact. As a result of having the second booklet in the third form the study of the reproduction of mammals has been advanced from the fifth to the fourth year of the school course. In history there is no difficulty in dealing with the doubtful private life and affairs of some historical characters. The same applies to literature.

As *head mistress* I have two further observations to add.

The most impressive feature all the time has been *the almost unanimous co-operation of both parents and pupils*. All have been dealt with quickly, and although booklets have been lent out well over a thousand times only one has been lost. The girls have responded to our trust and have treated the matter naturally, reverently and with reasonable reserve. The bond between school and each of the homes has been strengthened and the school has been placed in its proper perspective as assistant to the home.

The greatest advantage is undoubtedly the formation of a healthy attitude to sex. It is difficult to say which girls benefit most: it may be the pre-adolescents of the lower classes in that they are prepared for entry into adolescence before the onset of its emotional tensions and moral problems and before harm can come to them from wrong initiation, or perhaps the adolescents of the middle forms in that they know themselves and how to deal with the problems of behaviour, particularly those connected with boy-girl friendships, or possibly the young adults of the upper school in that they have a relatively mature understanding of and outlook on sex matters in general and marriage in particular. Whichever it may be, progressive adjustment throughout all these stages is an essential preparation for the problems of life.

Conclusion

The system as a whole suits our school. While fulfilling the general conditions laid down by the Church—both method and booklets have ecclesiastical approval—it is simple to operate and sufficiently flexible to adjust to individual and changing needs. By it we try to ensure that each of the girls has sufficient enlightenment from home if possible, supported by help from school, to guide her through the various phases of development as a girl, from admission to leaving, and we hope that she is thereby better prepared for both present and future.

The fact that this method suits us does not necessarily mean that it will suit others. Many schools, including some with non-Catholic pupils, use the booklets as we do, but others have adapted the method to suit themselves. In an English boarding-day school, for example, day-pupils are instructed by their mothers with the help of the booklets but boarders are dealt with by the head mistress, whereas in a South African boarding school the girls have access to a supply of booklets made available by the headmistress. In both cases the parents approve of the arrangements. It may well be, however, that some schools could use the booklets only to a limited extent or perhaps not at all, and some could not rely on the help and co-operation of the parents. Boarding and secondary modern schools, special schools and children's homes—all may require their own technique. Then in this account we have been concerned with girls—but what about boys? and mixed schools?

Any system of sex education must be thought out by applying the

general directives of the Church to the particular requirements, circumstances and possibilities of the school, centre or group concerned. But whatever method is adopted it should be an interim measure, for as Pius XII stressed in his allocution to mothers, one of the most important ends in view is to prepare the Catholic girls of this generation to do their duty in this respect as the Catholic mothers of the next generation.



LAI D ON THE SHELF—ALONE

AN OLD-AGE PENSIONER

STRICTLY speaking old-age pensioners no longer exist in Great Britain, for a kindly government has replaced the words 'old age' with the pleasanter sounding term of 'retirement'. That is but another example of a change that signifies little, for nothing can banish old age. It is a condition which is inevitable for all but those who die before that time is reached. No kind words or exercise of tact can eradicate it, though much can be done to ameliorate the lot of the aged.

Like all problems, the problems of old age cannot be solved unless they are met with realism, for it is impossible to overcome any difficulty that we refuse to recognize. No soothing words, no refusal to look truth in the face can alter the fact that to be in receipt of a retirement pension is to have started upon the final stage of that journey that leads from the cradle to the grave. A landmark has been reached, a further corner turned and the end has come into sight at last. No matter if another twenty, or even thirty, years of life remain they will be seen by all but the wilfully blind as the beginning of that last steep incline down which the man or woman who has reached it will travel to the grave. Filling in every moment of the remaining time as he may, exerting every ounce of his remaining strength to retain his hold on life, the ageing person knows in the secret places of his heart that he is beaten. He has lived his life, for good or ill, and now his time is running out.

Why is it that the man who was able to work, albeit with increasing difficulty, and to maintain his zest for life until the day