

BLACKFRIARS

earner before he was born or thought of; that, in its encyclicals, it has ever shown itself as his champion; that the reasons for its faith are clear and easily understood and, if properly applied, are more than a match for the anti-God Marxist.

Lest there be any misunderstanding it must be emphasized that it is useless to think that the Church's philosophy and social programme is likely to make much headway unless it is founded on and accompanied by the full spiritual life. The one must supplement the other.

Is it asking too much of the already heavily burdened parish-priests of the industrial areas for them to consider a week's mission based on the principles of quickening the spiritual life of the parish and at the same time *expounding the Church's social teaching*? It is obviously impossible to ask them to undertake the amount of study necessary for such a mission themselves, but there must be "religious" who would be only too glad of an opportunity to help in this most necessary work.

And let the meetings both in- and out-doors be open to all, Catholic and Marxist, but, for the Catholic, let him know that the Altar is his home. It is there, and there only, that he will find the strength to fight for all that he holds most dear, for without the initial strength to use them, all the weapons in the world are useless.

Finally, the author of these notes would beg the prayers of his readers for the Catholic workers and for those who do their utmost to destroy their Faith.

A WORKER.

THE SOUL OF A CHILD

THE presence or lack of certain philosophical or religious preoccupations at any period has a great deal to do with the prevailing attitude towards children and their education.

In primitive or spontaneous forms of human society the child is not a special subject of study. Children are naturally and roundly brought up in the large circle of the home, with its traditional wisdom and salutary rough and tumble.

In many of the Greek states, where political life was all-pervasive, it was inevitable that educational theories should

emphasize the primary importance of education for citizenship—a phase reproduced for us in modern states such as Italy and Germany.

A Jansenistic theology once darkened men's outlook on human nature and, in consequence, on its budding period. This gloom and the severity which harmonized with it persisted throughout the Victorian age. It was a time when children were habitually treated as criminals *latae sententiae*, an evil and perverse generation, to be repressed and chastized without mercy and without truce. For men of this epoch the child was, before all, a nuisance. It had no proper place in an adult world. A child (as Maria Montessori points out) was not to sit on the grown-ups' chairs. Nor was it to sit on the stairs. Hence, having no chair of its own, it could sit down only when some big person condescended to offer it the hospitality of a pair of knees.

In this brave new world of ours we have lived through, and perhaps lived down, those days of terror. The child is now made free of our city, is studied objectively, with due respect. Education is no longer looked upon as the imposition of a stern and repressive discipline, but rather as an ingenious system for helping and guiding children to the full expansion and development of their characters and talents.

While this change of attitude may be said, on the one hand, to be due to a dissolving out of all definite, philosophical or religious preoccupations or principles, it also owes a great deal to a few eminent educators who have made themselves the prophets and the saviours of the world of children—great souls such as Pestalozzi or Maria Montessori, alive to the sanctity of this evolving human life and the consequent sanctity of the educator's task.

Here and there, of course, we find the pendulum swinging to the opposite extreme from the former pessimistic and repressively negative attitude. Even great educators like Maria Montessori tend, at times, to yield to an unreasoning mysticism of childhood: from the devil of yore, the child has now become a god.

There is, nevertheless, in this new enthusiasm for the child, a strain that harmonized very closely with a major strain in Christianity. The worship of the Child at Christmas stresses no light matter. That same Child, grown up, revealed an unmistakable love of preference for children, who were "not to be driven away, for of such is the Kingdom of

Heaven." Not only are we to respect children (whose angels are "always looking into the face of the Father"), but we are taught that unless we too "become like little children again" we shall have no right of entrance into the Kingdom.

Jesus, therefore, saw in the child and authoritatively set before us an element of absolute and perennial value, something infinitely precious which may subsequently be lost or recaptured or developed into sanctity and the beatific vision; something which justifies our dithyrambs and encourages us in our efforts to disentangle and guarantee the true spirit of childhood from its counterfeits and perversions.

Such is the child as seen by Père Gratry when he writes:

Not the first glow of dawn, not the first scents of the rose, not the first song of the nightingale on nights of April or May, no, nothing, in nature or in art, can equal the beauty, the purity, the unique grace of a child. And nothing in religion itself draws one towards God, reveals God, so much as the faith, the trustfulness, of a child, a child's heart, voice and look: that heart which is at once so innocent and so passionate, which wants all because it gives itself entire, which wants to know everything because it has nothing to conceal; that voice, which speaks to men as men ought to speak to God; that calm, sweet look, plunging effortlessly into the depths of heaven.

That glowing freshness and vivacity of the dawn of God's image it is our ideal to fix and reinforce through life, strengthening and guiding the nascent qualities, teaching them how to meet, control and utilize the manifold forces and influences of life, so that an ingenuous nature may grow into a reflective personality.

The growing child faces life like a conqueror, treats the whole of experience as the material for its constructive and imaginative syntheses, hopes all things, essays all things, dares all things. At each stage in its progress it is assisted by a mysterious instinct or sensitiveness, implanted in it by the educative forces of nature. These "sensitive periods" have but to be noted, aided and abetted by the mother or the teacher and they will work themselves. But they can also be hindered and barred out, and once this has happened they can never be satisfactorily replaced.

We say that the growing child faces life like a conqueror. But it finds in control of its field of experiment an adult who may, through incomprehension or through faults in his

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own character, thwart the child's natural line of development, or profoundly weaken and warp its whole outlook on life.

For alongside the child's instincts of self-preservation and will to power there arises in it, from the earliest moments of its existence a fundamental enemy: fear. Chief among the fears that haunt the child is the fear of being proved incapable, insufficient, incompetent, unfit. This fundamental fear of inferiority, revealed in the fear of ridicule, may well be so real and physical as to bring about a state of illness, with a temperature recorded by the clinical thermometer.

If allowed to develop, or if reinforced, even, by stupid handling, these fears will obstruct the free flow of the life stream and spoil a life.

The first shock and set-back may be birth itself. Books have been written on the "trauma of birth," and Maria Montessori has a striking description of the fearsome difficulties and alarms faced by a new-born babe. Faulty adaptation in these early days will usually be followed by a chain of unhappy inhibitions and frustrations which only the advent of a great healing personality or a special grace would defeat.

Faith, reason and experience alike assure us that the incalculably valuable personality of each child calls for and should command our respect—respect the greater as the child-nature is still in a highly sensitive and potential stage. Every child makes a confident, implicit appeal to be loved and treasured for his or her own sake, and we should see to it that this affectionate appeal is never disappointed. Children expect us to give them the best, including the best of ourselves and our love. We must show them that we esteem them, value them, trust them. Otherwise we drive them out into the night and the darkness.

Those who habitually have to do with young children will rise to the level of their divine responsibilities only if they set themselves, by the poise and radiance of their feelings, the warm sympathy of their atmosphere and outlook, the wise devotedness and readiness of their hearts, to create around them the sunshine and welcome shade in which children can attain, with joy and assurance, the ideal stature proposed to them by the God made man.

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