

## A CATHOLIC PEOPLE'S COLLEGE

During the summer of 1944 a 'Catholic People's Week' was advertised to be held during August at Walsingham. The Government ban on certain coastal areas forced the organisers to cancel their arrangements. As considerable interest in the project was aroused it will not be out of place to explain here the ultimate aims the organisers had in mind and the plans they have made for future action.

Educational reform is much to the fore at the moment. But the schemes to be put into operation are mainly concerned with the education of children. Many thinkers are convinced there is an equally if not more urgent need to provide for the education of adults. The acknowledged leader in this field is Sir Richard Livingstone, whose *The Future in Education* states unanswerably the case for adult education.

The human mind and will, the human senses and emotions, are never at rest. They are always open to the million influences of experience. Whether we realise it or not, our own individual minds and wills are constantly fed and attracted by the realities of our daily round. Education should fit us to dominate these influences, to reject the unsound and absorb the wholesome. It should give us a high standard of discernment and firmness of character. Were we to drift and allow mind and will to submit passively to the flux of modern life with its press, radio, cinemas and factories, we should hardly succeed in retaining anything worthy of the name of personal autonomy. We do react, but do we react according to truth? Are our choices arbitrary, instinctive, thoughtless?

It is evident that the education which will guide us in these perilous days implies far more than the purely academic courses of our schools. To the mass of our countrymen the word 'education' means little more than schooling in this narrow sense. As Catholics we should know the Church, the home, the school are all three educative, the first two in a sense more profound and significant than the third.

The intellectual and moral 'climate' in which a child lives is of crucial importance for his development. But this is no less true of the adult. A man may reach physical manhood, but unless his environment is favourable, he may remain intellectually and morally

undeveloped. Indeed it has been said the prevalent disease of the age is chronic adolescence. The physical coming of age and the corresponding increase in the vigour of the mind and will may lead us to forget there is that higher maturity of the person, that conquest of the liberty of autonomy, that search after the full stature which God has ordained for each of us—a maturity, a conquest, a search that demand the individual effort of a life-time, the resources of society, the grace of God, the magisterium of the Church, and for most of us, the fires of Purgatory.

The early Christians were only admitted to Baptism after a course of training in the Catechumenate. It was essential they should be well armed against the pagan world. The cleaning of the mind from error preceded the more radical cleansing of the soul from sin. Our situation is not unlike theirs. Our minds too require the food of doctrine lest the working of our baptismal graces be hindered by a darkened intellect or wayward will. Those of us who are parents have the added obligation of providing the right 'climate' in our homes for our children. If our standards are of this world, our children will quickly sense the gulf between our religious pretensions and our daily lives. They will only too easily learn to harden the intellect and the will and live as façade Christians!

All but a small minority of Englishmen leave school at fourteen and are at once absorbed into the industrial world. They spend the vital years of adolescence in the turmoil of machines and the distractions of film, dance-hall and street. For the majority, their only reading is the cheap Press and the weekly picture papers. For some, more substantial food for the mind and more healthy exercise for the body are provided by various admirable societies who have seen the problem. But they can only bring their solutions to bear at the 'fag-end' of the day and often under great difficulties. We may compare to this the life of the undergraduate who, at this most critical age, is given the chance of forming his mind in the traditions of learning and culture. We may note how the ecclesiastical student is given an even greater opportunity. Indeed, it is not always realised how great a gulf has been set in this matter of intellectual and moral 'climate' between priest and people.

Sir Richard Livingstone and those who think with him advocate the founding in England of Adult Colleges on the lines of the Folk High Schools which have been so successful in Denmark and other Scandinavian countries. This is not the place to attempt a detailed history of these Scandinavian Schools. In addition to Sir Richard Livingstone's book, which gives some account of them, one might recommend *Education for Life* by N. Davies, *Folk High Schools of*

*Denmark* by C. Muller, and *School for Life* by F. M. Forster. All that can be done here is to draw attention to the guiding principles of the Scandinavian movement.

They are well summed up in the titles of the two above books—*School for Life*, *Education for Life*. The Folk High Schools claim to train the pupil to live. They do not give vocational training in the limited sense. The original founders of the movement a century ago held that at the age of eighteen the young man intensely feels the need of a philosophy of life, some satisfactory answer to the questions 'Why am I here?' and 'What must I do?' Their Schools therefore aimed at supplying the answers and by a method whose spirit is remarkably akin to the traditional teaching practice of the Catholic Church. For to an age of dry and fruitless academic instruction, Grundtvig, the genius responsible for the movement, gave his doctrine of 'the living word.'

He was led to it by a religious difficulty. He was disturbed by the hundred and one contradictory interpretations of Scripture and set about to seek a rule of faith. Though he never discovered the infallible voice of the Church, he did stumble upon one vital principle of Catholic Faith. He held that the truths concerning Christ's teaching are to be found on the living lips of the faithful as they recite the Creeds. Christianity is a living word! The whole approach to teaching in his Folk High Schools was to be dominated by this dynamic concept of truth. The School was to be a living community in which teachers and pupils were in constant touch. Lectures were to be far more than formal expositions; they were rather to be conversations in which teacher and pupil were to co-operate and truth to form the bond that united them and made their contact fructify in a true and lived philosophy of life.

Those who read the books I have suggested will see how successful this method has proved and what an opportunity it has offered to the ordinary man. The remarkable transformation of Denmark in the nineteenth century owes much to the Folk High Schools, which have since spread all over Scandinavia.

The organisers of the Walsingham Week are convinced that Catholic People's Colleges for adults would be of real value to the cause of the Church in England. The 'Week' was intended to give a short course on the Danish lines and to gather a small band of Catholics able and willing to discuss the possibilities and difficulties of the scheme. We felt too that we should be giving a lead to Catholic planning which should forestall any Government venture into this field. Should a College materialise soon, it would also meet an immediate need by providing Catholics on demobilisa-

tion with a pleasant and valuable environment for a 'refresher course' in Catholic doctrine and community life.

It is necessary to describe the Catholic People's College as we conceive it. It will be established in or near a small country town. As the students will reside, the multitudinous distractions of a city would be a grave hindrance to the life of the College. Physical work will be an essential and a garden or small farmstead will give opportunity for this. The number of students will be limited to a maximum of fifty: otherwise the growth of a real community spirit would be impossible and individuals tend to be lost in a mob. There will be no examinations and no diplomas! The principle underlying all study, reading, discussion, work and recreation will be the imparting and the sharing—in the life of the College—of a thoroughly Catholic attitude to life with all the high standards this involves. Courses will be given in Holy Scripture, Christian doctrine, Liturgy, History (ecclesiastical and civil), Social Doctrine and English Literature. Daily Sung Mass and Compline will be the two most important community acts and the sources of the spirit of the house.

Objections are numerous and serious. But we may reduce the questions raised to four main problems:

Firstly, why Catholic People's Colleges? There is no need to labour the truism that Catholics no less than others need instruction and practice in the art of Christian living. Of late years great movements have arisen with the express purpose of deepening and broadening the minds of Catholics and of encouraging them to enter into their incomparable spiritual, intellectual and cultural heritage. I need only name a few—Y.C.W., the Sword of the Spirit, the Grail, the Legion of Mary, the C.S.G., the C.E.G. It may be objected, therefore, that all these societies are already providing just that adult education we claim to be so essential. For a complete reply to this objection, the reader is referred to Sir Richard Livingstone's book, in which he meets a similar one in relation to the work of such bodies as the W.E.A. Briefly our contention is that more can be done and a more permanent and profound impression made in five months of residence in a college than in as many years of spasmodic meetings. We are convinced that students returning to their various societies from the College would be able to make more valuable contributions than before to their life and work. The history of the Danish Folk High Schools and the fine achievements of their ex-pupils are proofs in point.

Then, who will come to them? On the face of it, this seems the most formidable objection of all. Who in England will be able to afford five months away from his job in a residential College, which

gives no specialist training, has no examinations and grants no diplomas? We admit few English Catholics are likely at first to see the College as anything more than a luxury. Something so entirely new is not usually an immediate success. As in Denmark, the 'apostles' of the movement will be the first generations of students. In an age and country like our own, where division of labour and specialisation are accepted as inevitable and determine the kind of daily life most of us lead, only experience of a fuller and broader life of both mind and body can reveal the need and the joy of seeing and living life as a whole. But the practical difficulty remains. Who can afford it? It is against our ideal to reserve our College for those only who are wealthy enough to come to it. We want it to be open to every Catholic, whatever his social and economic status. So far the following possibilities have occurred to us.

If our College comes into being by the time the War ends, we may find our best plan will be to adopt a short-term policy of running a series of much shorter courses—monthly ones, for instance—for the benefit of Catholics who will be demobilised. This short-term policy will allow our students to take advantage of what we offer, for a small fee. It would gradually merge into the long-term policy of the five months' course. If military service remains obligatory, some of our public and secondary school pupils may be willing to take the College Course during the interval between leaving School and joining up. University students also, after their specialised training in their particular faculties may appreciate the more general intellectual life of our College. Among Catholic employers are many who are anxious to do all they can for the benefit of their workers. Might we not persuade them to grant some of the latter leave of absence? Many men of more mature age often regret they have little or no opportunity of toning up their minds and refreshing their knowledge. Some of these may be in a position to join us. It may well happen that if the College does its work well, some of our parishes and national societies will consider the possibility of founding bursaries for their members.

Thirdly, who will teach? This problem needs careful handling. On the one hand, the mixture of sacred and secular study raises the whole question of the co-operation of clergy and laity, whilst on the other the teaching method, informal, conversational, personal and communitarian, demands a new approach and a new technique. The teaching of Scripture and Dogma must be under the control of the clergy; the other courses may well be in lay hands. The adjustments here need careful thought. The Popes have insisted on co-operation between clergy and laity and have laid down the principles on which

it has to be organised. Often enough, we see little evidence of such co-operation in our parishes. Indeed, it cannot be improvised in five minutes. Both clergy and laity are shy of its air of novelty, though, as Pius XI insisted, it is nothing new in reality. The problem will have to be faced squarely in our College and solved according to the Pontifical directives and in a spirit of charity founded on sound doctrine.

There are plenty of priests and laymen able and willing to teach in the College and not a few who have long since seen the need of a more vital technique. Catholic chaplains and education officers in the Forces should be of great help to us here. First and foremost, we shall need the approval of ecclesiastical authority. We ask here and now for prayers that those who hope to start the College may obtain this approval and prove themselves worthy of it. If they fail to obtain it, their efforts may bear fruit in ways other than they expected. What does it matter, provided God's will be done?

Finally, how will the scheme be financed? We do not yet know. We hope, of course, that there will be benefactors. Of one thing we are sure: the College must be free from State control and cannot therefore consider a State grant. It has been suggested the College might be run as a company with some form of shareholding. Three principles we are convinced are essential. The College must pay. The Staff must receive a living, family wage. The pupils' fees must be the minimum possible.

The College as yet exists only in the imagination and hopes of a few priests and layfolk. Our next move must be to form an association of those who think with us that the College should be founded. The Walsingham Week was to have inaugurated this association and to have been the first of its meetings.

Plans for a Summer School to be held in August of this year are well advanced. Readers who wish to join the Association, whether they intend or not to come to the Summer School, are asked to write to the author at 1 Bellevue, Wilton, Taunton, Somerset.

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