

AUTONOMY IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION

DURING the latter half of the nineteenth century the Catholics of England entered upon their long struggle to maintain their schools in a condition of material and professional efficiency equal to that of the wholly state-supported schools in the national system. Both in primary and in secondary education the price of monetary aid from the Government has been increased control by the local or central education authority, and in consequence the chief pre-occupation of our struggle has been to safeguard the principle of Catholic teachers in Catholic schools, and to ensure the integrity of the teaching in doctrine and morals given during the hours devoted by law to religious instruction.

In the matter of the curriculum of secular teaching we have been content in past years to follow the lead set by the non-Catholic schools, and have adopted their general educational policy and conformed ourselves as best we could to its varying demands. Even those schools which have always been independent of government control have been forced, during the last forty years, by their acceptance of the external examination system to abandon their autonomy and the traditional system of education which they had inherited from the continental schools of pre-penal days, and to conform their syllabuses and teaching system to the dictates of the external examining boards. Thus it has come about gradually that the curriculum of secular teaching, with its attendant syllabus of books to be read and periods or matter to be studied, has ceased to be chosen by the authorities of the school and has been imposed by an impersonal external authority which has little or no understanding of the purpose and needs of Catholic education.

In recent years it has become increasingly apparent to many educationists and teachers, by no means always in agreement among themselves as to the ultimate purpose of human life, that the examination system, as it is at present in vogue, is inherently vicious because it gives rise to false methods of teaching which put a premium on memory work and the imbibing of ready-made opinions, and tend to stultify and deaden the critical and appreciative faculties. These false methods of teaching give rise in their turn to a false attitude to knowledge, which causes it to be valued for its utility rather than for its truth. The curriculum has come in process of time to be more and more dominated by the examinations, until at present it is almost true to say that instead of being, as they

were originally designed to be, an assessment of the quality of the education given, the passing of them has become the be-all and end-all of education.

This mortal disease inherent in the examination system, and in the syllabus and teaching methods it imposes, is only the natural reflection in the world of education of the mortal disease which has gripped our civilisation as a whole. The root cause of this disease is ignorance or forgetfulness of man's nature as a redeemed child of God, and of the purpose of human life in relation to his ultimate destiny.

There is an element of tragedy in the situation that Catholics, who know the truth because they are divinely taught by their Faith, should have taken over almost without question an alien system of education, the tendency of which is to produce men and women whose critical and appreciative faculties are so under-developed that they are incapable of distinguishing good from evil, true from false, in any situations in life except those in which sin and untruth appear in crude and obvious forms.

The purpose of education is to fit men and women for life, and the purpose of this life, so Christians believe, is to fit them for eternal life. They are made fit for eternal life in this life, by truth and grace. Truth comes to them primarily by the grace of God's Revelation, but also by a grace-enlightened understanding of Nature. Nature (and by Nature we mean the whole of God's Creation in this world; both man and the surroundings in which God has set him) can only be fully understood in the light of God's revelation, but the study of Nature, seen in the light of revealed truth, itself illustrates and makes clear to the human mind the fulness of the content of that truth. The first function of Christian education then is to impart a knowledge of God's Revelation; of Jesus Christ as the way, the truth and the life; of the truth to be lived and of the supernatural means to living it. This is the purpose of explicit instruction in religious doctrine.

But the truth which is in Christ Jesus has to be lived by the individual in a world of men and things; in particular situations and circumstances; in home life, in commerce, in art, in scientific research, in war and peace, in a multitude of relationships and situations set up by the restless creativity of the human mind. Every relationship and situation must be judged and negotiated according to a standard which is rooted in God's nature and will and embodied in his Revelation. If human life is to be lived in accordance with God's will, its whole complexity must be viewed and judged in the light of the standards of truth, goodness, and beauty set forth in

Divine Revelation and in a grace-enlightened study of the natural law.

The second function of education, then, is to impart the power to view and judge human life in the light of these standards; and this is the province of the secular curriculum in our schools. That curriculum is rightly divided between science, art (used here in its widest sense to denote the making of things), and literature, because these cover the whole of human life. In science we study the nature of the material things with which God has surrounded us, in art we learn to use these materials to make things for our needs, and in literature (in its widest sense) we are confronted with man himself, and the story of his efforts and errors and triumphs in face of the problems of human life; the problems set up by art and science and human relationships.

It is obvious then that explicit religious doctrine is all-important because it gives us the fundamental principles according to which life must be lived, but that it may easily remain sterile and notional only unless it is translated into living experience. The object of education is to prepare for life. Everything in it therefore, and more especially its whole literary side, must be related to life. The tragedy of our present Catholic education is that we have allowed it, on its secular side, to become, partially at least, divorced from the fundamental sources from which our true life springs. We are surrounded by a materialism often disguised in subtle forms; our common social standards, our business morality, our art and literature, our newspapers are impregnated with it, and our young people are apt to absorb it quite unconsciously because the education provided by their secular curriculum fails to fortify them against it. It does not relate their religious principles to it, nor does it, except in isolated cases, give them standards by which to view and judge and condemn it. Their teachers are either unaware of the subtle presence of this materialism, because they too have failed to relate their religious principles to it, or they are unable owing to the nature of their syllabus and the exigencies of examination-passing to do much to counteract it. True, there is a great deal in the explicit teaching of religious doctrine, in scripture lessons and sermons, which is in striking contrast with it; but when the Gospel says 'how hardly shall they that have riches enter the Kingdom of God' and common social standards backed by the moral implicit in much of our current literature and art conspire to teach that poverty and suffering are at all costs to be avoided, and that money and what it can buy is the supremely important thing in life, it is often the Gospel that becomes unreal and apparently out of touch with life,

and the implications of the Incarnation and the Cross remain notional propositions to be believed in but hardly acted upon.

Since the outbreak of the present war the gravity of the times through which we are passing has resulted in a deeper realisation on the part of Catholic educationists that all is not well, that there is an alarming leakage not only from our elementary schools but from the secondary schools as well, and that many of our young people, well-educated by current secular standards, go out into the world ill-instructed in the practice of their faith and unaware that it is a way of life underlying and giving meaning to their everyday avocations.¹

In the non-Catholic world agitation for educational reform, always considerable, has in recent years steadily increased in volume, and in October, 1941, Mr. R. A. Butler, President of the Board of Education, appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Sir Cyril Norwood to consider the whole question of curriculum and examinations in secondary schools and report on suggested changes. This committee has now issued its recommendations (June, 1943).²

The Report is a most interesting document and suggests changes in the examination system which, if they come into force, will have a very great effect upon the future of our Catholic schools. The general policy advocated by the report is to restore autonomy to the schools and to set them free very largely from the domination by the external examining bodies to which in process of time they have become subject. To this end they propose the abolition of the School Certificate examination³ and the substitution for it of a cer-

¹ Two interesting articles by Dom J. B. Sandeman, O.S.B., have recently appeared in the *Tablet*, 'The Divided Mind' and 'Literature and Life,' dealing with the divorce of the secular curriculum in our schools from reality and religion. At the Conference of Catholic Colleges held at Ratcliffe, Easter, 1942, Fr. J. D. Boyle, S.J., read a remarkable paper in which he advocated that a syllabus of Christian education, a summary of the possible lines of which he sketched, should be drawn up and presented to the appropriate authorities as the material upon which in future the Catholic Secondary Schools in England desired that their pupils should be examined in the *School and Higher Certificates*. Fr. Boyle did not, however, deal with the inherent viciousness of the examination system and its effect upon the teaching of any syllabus. His paper was greeted with enthusiasm by the assembled Headmasters of the Catholic Secondary Schools of England, and the conference proceeded to set up a committee, which is still at work, to deal with the whole question.

² Curriculum and examinations in secondary schools—Report of the committee of the Secondary Schools Examination Council appointed by the President of the Board of Education in 1941. H.M. Stationery Office, 1/6 net.

³ The paragraph in the report giving the arguments against the School Certificate when read in conjunction with that giving those for it (pages 30-32) proves convincingly the soundness of this recommendation.

tificate granted by the school to its pupils at the age of 16 plus, which will assess the all-round attainments of each boy or girl partly upon school record and partly upon the results of an internal examination conducted by the school authorities on syllabuses and papers prepared by themselves. To ensure the maintenance of a proper all-round standard of teaching the present inspectorate will be strengthened and presumably all schools will become subject to periodical inspection. It is proposed that this change should not be introduced at once, in order that experiment and research may go forward in the scientific keeping of school records. Meanwhile, for a transitional period of seven years it is proposed that the School Certificate should become a 'subject' examination, and should be carried out by the existing University examining bodies, but should be conducted in each case by a sub-committee containing a strong representation of teachers.

It is further proposed that in the place of the Higher Certificate a School-Leaving Examination should be conducted at 18 plus twice a year by an external examining body. The purpose of this examination would be to meet the requirements of University entrance, of entry into the professions and other needs. It would be a wide and elastic examination, in which pupils would be enabled to take the subjects they require for the particular purpose they have in view, and no school would need to insist on its Sixth Form pupils taking it unless it were convenient to do so in order to gain exemption from Entrance Examinations to the Universities, professional bodies, or the Services.

The proposals as to Scholarships to the Universities are far-reaching and provide for a widely extended award of state scholarships, not merely upon examination performance, but also upon record. It is also proposed that the winning of a College Scholarship at Oxford or Cambridge, or a University Scholarship elsewhere should constitute a claim upon public funds for assistance towards the cost of living at the University.

In regard to the general proposals of the report as they will affect the education of the country at large, it may be said that they represent in many ways a return to conservative and traditional conceptions of education, while embodying the fruit of much modern experiment and experience. The world, however, is changing so quickly that these proposals may well be of less value than the more fundamental educational principles which the report emphasises. It is proposed to enlarge the definition of secondary education so as to embrace three broad types of education, viz: Grammar School, Technical School, and Modern School. A Lower School of pupils

from 11 plus to 13 plus is envisaged in which the curriculum will be common to all schools, and from this pupils will be transferred after consultation with their parents at 13 plus or earlier to the school judged to be most suitable to their talents and capacity.

The report, in defining the purposes of education, nowhere states explicitly that its ultimate aim is to prepare men and women for eternal life—but it comes very near it. 'We believe that education cannot stop short of recognising the ideals of truth and beauty and goodness as we do not believe that these ideals are of temporary convenience only, as devices for holding together society till they can be dispensed with as knowledge grows and organisation becomes more scientific. Further, we hold that the recognition of such values implies, for most people at least, a religious interpretation of life which for us must mean the Christian interpretation of life' (p. viii).

The result of this basic principle, though it is hardly expressed in language which would commend itself wholly to believers in the Catholic doctrine of Revelation, is that in all their recommendations the committee are on the side of Christian truth and natural law in their respect for the human personality of the child and their dislike of attempts at its exploitation in favour of any so-called ideology.

For the Catholic body in this country, however, the supremely important feature of these recommendations is that if they are carried into effect our autonomy will be restored to us and we shall be able to set about the task of working out a really Christian curriculum and teaching method unhampered by outside interference. May we seize our chance with both hands.

HENRY ST. JOHN, O.P.