

Christian Education In The Home

By a Dominican Nun

Australian Catholic Truth Society No.1219 (1955)

THE purpose of my talk today, is to think over with you, some of the ways in which Catholic parents may play their part in the Christian education of their children. It would hardly be possible for anyone to choose a topic more important than this, and that for two reasons.

MATERIALISM.

Firstly, it seems no exaggeration to say that our civilization, our way of life is on the verge of destroying itself. Materialism, that theory which denies all spiritual realities — God, the soul, the life hereafter, which makes the human being a mere object, has gained a terrifying hold on the minds of men. Almost every day we hear something which forces us to realize that the Catholic Church is one of the few institutions that still respect every human being as a person, of priceless value in the sight of God.

I cannot develop this point any further, but it leads to the second of my reasons. It is obvious that our children will have to bear the brunt of this struggle against anti-human, anti-Christian forces. The fate of the world lies in our children's hands. As a nun writing in America states, "Even a quick look around will assure us that the influences set against our children today amount almost to a diabolical plot." But the "child is still the strongest bridge between God and man." And when we realize that no educational influence on earth is as powerful nor as permanent in its results as that of the family and home, you will see why I think this topic is so vital. The enemies of religion know that their most effective weapon is the attack against family life. You, too, must realize as fully as possible, the power that is yours.

IN THE HOME.

"Education," it is said, "is the help that is given to the growing personality of the child to recognize itself and to become all that God intends it to be," — a truly human person, with all its powers and gifts fully developed and used for the glory of God and the service of others.

It is the home that makes possible the growth of the child's personality. With every waking moment, the child becomes more conscious of itself, more ready to absorb the influence of those nearest to it. Its soul is, as it were, untouched soil, which places no obstacles in the way of anything planted in it. In later years, many interests compete for its attention. In early childhood, the mother first, and in lesser degree the father and other members of the family absorb the child's whole attention and so can contribute very deeply to the development of its personality. From them it learns natural independence in walking and talking. From the parents it discovers the meaning of love, security and authority. No one else can love the child in exactly the way a mother loves it as part of her very self — no one can therefore know it nor influence it as she does.

WHAT THIS MEANS.

It is not hard to see from this the tremendous importance of a good home. What is there, almost subconsciously imbibed, will never be rooted out of the person's being though it may be clouded over or twisted for a time by later experiences. How great then is the parents' responsibility and their need of the graces of matrimony, to bring up their children in the fear and love of God.

In discussing more in detail the parents share in the education of their children, I shall consider four main aspects of the way in which the child is prepared, as Pope Pius XI expressed it "for what he must be and what he must do here below in order to attain the sublime end for which he was created." The home must set the child well on the way to —

...a deeply sincere religious life and sense of spiritual values.

...a deep respect for the things of the mind.

...a love and an appreciation of what is beautiful.

...a respect for the rural way of life and its special place in God's plan. (I am speaking directly to you in the National Catholic Rural Movement. Children less fortunate than yours, who grow up in the urban environment, can still inculcate the first three values and learn to appreciate this one too.)

It is in the first of these, the development of the child's religious life, that the parents must be to the child "an authentic revelation of God." He sees God through them. Seeing their love for one another, he more readily grasps the truth of God's love for all; seeing them pray, he senses the holiness of God and the reality of the unseen world of saints and angels. Their trust in God, despite bad seasons and the like, their kindness to less fortunate neighbours, their unsparing attention to their jobs, all mirror for the child the fatherhood, the very love of God.

THE CHILD IS INFLUENCED.

Consider too, the power a mother wields in developing the conscience of her child — the care she should take that it is rightly formed, delicate but not scrupulous and over-fearful. Then, as the children grow older, the father's influence becomes stronger, and his attitude to prayer, to the Sacraments, his way of speaking about priests and the Church, determine, even without his being aware of it, the way his children, especially the boys, will regard these things.

Beside these indirect ways, there are also many ways of directly helping the child to know, love and serve God. I am sure you all have experienced the power and the joy of family prayers, of Grace before meals and the evening Rosary, of hearing Mass together. You have known perhaps the joyous share the whole family can have in the first Holy Communion of the six-year old or the Baptism of the new baby. Make the most of these events, and do all you can to bring your children to a reverent joy in all the feasts of the Church by having special practices for Lent and Advent in preparation for Easter and Christmas, by establishing family customs, for example, a home Crib, Carols and even a Christmas Play, or welcoming the Christ Child by inviting an orphan child to the home. Let the children save up for Masses for the Holy Souls in November, or to help the Missions.

A CHRISTIAN ATMOSPHERE.

The Crucifix on the wall, the pictures of Our Lord and His Mother — the loveliest you can afford — the little shrine with lights and flowers — these unceasingly speak to your little ones of God's love and His Beauty, preparing them for that friendship with God, that willing, personal submission to Him that is true freedom and happiness.

Growing up from babyhood in a truly Christian atmosphere such as this, children are soon ready for more definite instructions in the truths of our Holy Faith. In giving these, a mother has no equal as a teacher, if she strives sincerely to do it well, remembering that she is not working alone. The divine life of Grace is in the soul of the child, giving him what Saint Thomas calls “a kind of divine intelligence, the light of Faith, which helps the light of the intellect.” Anyone who has taught religion to children, knows how eagerly they take it in; they have a natural religious sense. There are books, for example, Christopher’s Talks to Children, which help parents to develop the Faith of their children, but it would be the most wonderful help of all if the parents would read or tell them the stories of the Bible. Such stories enthrall the children more than any others, and help them to know Jesus and Mary as real people. Even the young ones will listen to the Gospel stories as given in Monsignor Ronald Knox’s version. We should never forget that the Bible is a source of Divine Truth and it would be hard to over-estimate the value of a child’s continual and loving contact with God’s own words in the Old and especially in the New Testament.

Even when the religious instruction of the children is given in school or by correspondence courses, the responsibility of the parents does not cease. They should know what the child is studying, discuss it with him, help him to make the knowledge part of his daily life, a real influence on his actions and thoughts. This is not to be done by nagging at the child but by keeping the atmosphere of the home such that it is easy and natural for the child to practise virtue and live what he learns. The whole family should be vitally interested in these Religion lessons, and make it clear that they are regarded as the most important part of the child’s schooling. It is a pity that the text-books used are not more helpful and attractive to both parents and children.

TIME CAN BE FOUND.

I hope that not too many of you are wondering, “How on earth could we find time to do all that?” A mother’s day is always a busy and tiring one, especially when the children are young. I know there are times in the year when it would be impossible to find even a few spare minutes. But I know too, that you long for all that is best for your children; and love feels no burdens and scarcely knows the meaning of the word impossible. It would be helpful to call to mind two principles — the value of going slowly and the power of incidental teaching.

In a story of Ethel Meynell’s, telling of a father’s rearing of his motherless daughter, I once read a line I have never forgotten. “He gave her,” it said, “the inestimable benefit of leisure for her growing.” Nothing is gained by hurrying little children on beyond their powers.

A quiet lesson of from eight to ten minutes, given daily or several times a week is enough for little ones, provided there are other times for reading or listening to holy stories and joining in family devotions. Even prayers need not be learnt all at once. The little one can say “Our Father, who art in Heaven, bless your little child,” or “Hail Mary, full of grace, help me to love your Child Jesus,” and thus gradually learn the prayer, phrase by phrase, as its meaning is given time to sink into his mind. Never forget that it is God’s will that the parents should be the ones to teach the child to pray, as Mary and Joseph helped the boy Jesus to advance in wisdom and grace.

Incidental teaching gains its immense effectiveness from being given at the moment it is needed. It is the explanation given just when the child asks for it, and so is fully alert to the answer. It is the story told when the child is most receptive, the question asked when the issue really means something and is not just part of a lesson. Most parents know that daily home life has many such occasions, and mothers especially know that young children are very confidential and responsive

when they are being put to bed, or helping them at some little task. Often we teachers envy mothers their chances of co-operating so intimately in the child's growth to holiness.

NURSERY OF SAINTS.

In truth, the family circle is the nursery of saints as of sane, human beings. There the child finds the love, security and guidance, which are his greatest needs. I shall end this part of my talk by a quotation. "It is by loving and being loved that persons grow as persons. It is in the family that relationships are essentially personal and each person is valued as a person." So, we look to the family to preserve that form of society, that way of life which respects the personality, the unique value in God's eyes, of every human being. The mothers who humbly strive to open the eyes of the children to the truths of the first chapters of the catechism are doing a work of incalculable, irreplaceable value. Maybe that is the vocation of the country family — to keep alive a sane view of life by educating their children to be, as Father Gerald Vann expresses it, "creative personalities who will share the redemptive work of Jesus Christ through their lives, their work, their homes and their love." If ever you get the chance, read the stories of Saints Pius X and John Bosco, Saints Therese and Maria Goretti, and you will realize how close is the connection between good homes, nobility of character and sanctity.

VOCATIONS.

You will understand too, why vocations to the priesthood and the religious life come usually in the good home; and with grateful love, you will encourage the children who want to serve God in this great way.

LOVE OF TRUTH.

I am afraid I have too little time to deal adequately with the three other aspects of educative work in the home. But, as a Dominican, I must speak at least briefly, on the parent's share in developing in each child a deep respect for the things of the mind, for the work of the human intellect. The work of the intellect is to grasp truth, to grasp the meaning of things as they are in the reality of their own being, to come always nearer to seeing things as they must be in God's sight. It may be the Divine Knowledge of God as He has revealed it to us, or the natural knowledge of the universe He has created, or the world of ideas by which the human mind strives to understand the purpose of existence — why the world is, what we are, what are our real powers, what are the relationships between things and men and the unseen world. Whatever it be, the unspoilt human intellect seeks this knowledge and yearns for it, because even when it does not know it, it is always seeking the greatest reality, God, the source of all Truth.

The modern world has little taste for this thirst for truth. Too often, insensitive and blind to the inner meaning of things, it asks only "Of what use are they to us?" "Is there any money in it for us?" It degrades everything by commercializing it. It scorns those who have no material gain to show for all their study. There is nothing wrong with putting our knowledge to practical use. The Holy Family at Nazareth had to do so daily. The grave mistake is to forget the higher value of knowledge, to let our minds be tainted by the materialistic outlook around us; even sometimes to encourage our children to adopt this attitude. That is why I am dwelling on a point that may at first, seem to have little to do with education in the home.

THE COUNTRY HOME.

I can see in country life and the country home great possibilities for keeping alive a right love for knowledge. I can sense a danger too in the fact that parents are often dependent on non-Catholic schools for the outside education of their children. There is bound to be confusion and conflict in the child's mind, if the ideals and standards of value differ, especially if one held that man, not God, was the measure of Truth. The home must therefore deliberately set itself to correct this, to give the child the right meaning of truth and knowledge. For this, the country child has the great advantage of living from his earliest days in close contact with natural things, with things that have come straight from the hand of God. "Everything that is, is more than it is," and the child can gain real knowledge from the company of living and growing things. Natural things exert an almost incredibly strong influence on the child mind, which can surrender its whole being so fully to what it sees and loves — a fleet of ducklings on a pond, a calf on its rickety legs, a moonlight walk to turn off the windmill, the tall trees always in their place, the ride round the thirty-acre on the Massey-Harris pulled by eight strong horses.

GOD'S PURPOSE IN ALL THINGS.

Experiences such as these things can hardly fail to give real knowledge and at the same time to guard and guide the spirit of the child, giving it a sense of true peace and true grandeur, which it need never lose. In your own minds, now perhaps you are seeing again, what used to give you a special joy or comfort, reassurance or inspiration. The meaning and purpose of these natural things is something a child can understand, and at the same time, he is led, almost, unawares, to see God through them. Thus is developed a sense of wonder at the mystery of being that could be a most precious possession for life.

This power to see the creatures of God as the symbols of His goodness and beauty, if rightly developed, is a means of enabling the child to enter more fully into the spirit of the liturgy, that is, the Church's public worship of God. It would help him to see the significant way in which flowers and candles, oil and wine and bread and water are used in the Sacrifice of the Mass and in the Sacraments. And though I cannot dwell on the thought now, it would be worth your while to think deeply about the educative value of the Church's liturgy, all Her ways of giving worship to God, and bringing man to God. This seems a long way from so-simple-seeming a subject as the study of nature; but all real knowing has such far-reaching effects.

READING.

By encouraging children to read and to reflect on what they read, parents can also strongly influence a child's attitude to learning. But the books must be worth reading, for you cannot develop a taste for what is good, nor the power to seek and find the beauty or truth of what is written if the book is of poor quality. There is now a great wealth of good books for children and young people. It would be difficult to over-estimate the value of helping your children to love reading. Some great educators do not hesitate to state that the test of the well-educated person is the quality of his reading. Can he really read a great book? If you could bring back to your home the custom of reading aloud to your children (or their reading to you) and of letting them try out their powers of thinking and discussing with you, you might help to make Australia a land of genuine culture. But the right book is the important thing and it is your responsibility to do all you can to get them, plenty of them—Saints' books, Nature books, stories, fairy and folk tales, stories of real life. But remember there is a world of difference between a genuine fairy story as found in Hans Andersen's Tales or Andrew Lang's Fairy Books and some pixie story by Enid Blyton.

Before I leave this problem of developing a deep respect for the things of the mind, perhaps I could mention the right attitude to take towards the children's progress in their studies. A Catholic parent should never be tempted to ask — What is the good of all this study of poetry or history or Latin — it won't help you to get a job — nor is it wise to use, as a spur to urge children to work, the argument that they will not get on in the world. Again, keep always in mind the truth that children differ very greatly in natural gifts and aptitudes. One of the greatest lessons we have to learn in life is to accept ourselves as we are and our children have to learn it too. What is needed, is to find what one can really do and do it as perfectly as we can.

“SUCCESS” IS NOT ENOUGH.

How much more sane and balanced is the personality of the child who is not for ever being harried by unfair comparisons with what other children can do. Often we are so anxious for the success of our children that we forget the harm we may be thus doing to their characters their attitude to life. Rather should we train our children to rejoice sincerely in the gifts and success of others.

LOVE OF BEAUTY.

When I come to consider what it means to have given a child a love and appreciation of what is beautiful in life, in art, in music, in literature, I could wish I had a poet's power to convey in a few words, a whole world of meaning. It is indeed “fatally easy to think we have educated a child when we have trained him to think, to acquire masses of useful information, to do many useful things.” We could do all this and leave his inner spirit untouched or dulled. Someone has written that “modern education has produced a world, completely out of tune with beauty, unaware of it, and incapable of seeing it, reverencing it or producing it.” The ugliness of much that we see in big cities — advertisements on hoardings, factory buildings, radio programmes, comic strips and popular songs and dance music, that are utterly empty of all loveliness and graciousness — These are evidence of wide-spread disregard for beauty, and, to quote a great Catholic writer, Jacques Maritain, “The dismissal of beauty is a dangerous thing for humanity.”

It would scarcely be too much to say that in dismissing or belittling what is beautiful we are dismissing God. For God is Beauty as well as Truth and Goodness, and “all the beauty we can see is but an addition to the story through which we become aware of God.”

"ON EARTH THE BROKEN ARC..."

I know some may be tempted to think that all this talk of beauty and art is too impractical, too much far away from the business of everyday life — or that the country home cannot do much about it. But a Catholic should never let himself think like that. He should know that to be a complete person, means to be able to see and to feel, to imagine and even to create what is beautiful. I cannot go into this any further, much as I would like to. I shall say just this: — the home can do more in this matter than the school. Like love for our Holy Faith, appreciation of the fine and lovely things of life comes from constant association with beautiful things themselves and with people who have a genuine love and understanding of them. So it is for parents to help their children in this vital matter. Simplicity, neatness, colour, brightness, and good taste can make the house and garden lovely without great expense.

A few really good pictures by great artists can help to form the children's taste. There are, for example, so many of Our Lady by artists such as Fra Angelico, Botticelli and Raphael, that it seems a shame to have instead, ones that are unworthy of Our Lady's beauty and dignity. A good book for

helping children to understand art has a significant title, *Pictures to Grow Up With*. Children take great notice of pictures in the home and I know I can recall vividly all the pictures in our home. Hence the importance of having lovely ones and of encouraging the children really to look at them — and to make their own, to draw and paint and make things. Much of a child's future happiness and goodness depends on what the home and the school have done to help him to discover and develop his special creative powers, his capacity for making something beautiful.

RESPONSE TO POETRY.

It seems harder to discover what can be done at home to foster a love of poetry. There are collections of works by genuine poets (that is, not just writers of verse for children) which are produced in such a way as to captivate the attention — such as the *Adventures in Poetry* series by Mary Daunt, or *The Blackbird in the Lilac*, by James Reeves or an *Australian Adventures in Poetry*, edited by Donald McLean, and *Gospel Rhymes*, published by Sheed and Ward. If these could be read aloud and talked over, it would be a good beginning. The attitude of the adults to poetry has a great deal to do with the child's response to it.

MUSIC — TO UPLIFT OR DEGRADE?

To develop appreciation of good music is both easier and harder — easier because modern people will listen more readily to music than to poetry; harder because so much music is heard that is utterly worthless, if not vulgar and degrading. Positive efforts are always best in this as in all education. You can find ways of knowing what is good; and by wise choice of radio programmes and the playing of records of good music the home can set up right standards for the children before their taste has been spoilt. If it is at all possible, some members of the family who have the gift should learn to play the piano or other musical instruments. They can then give great joy to the others.

I could say much more, but I daresay you are thinking that I have said enough. Still I think you will see from the above, that one of the defects of the education of girls, especially of those who are going to be home-makers in the country, is that it is too similar to a boy's education. Training in art and music, in subjects such as history and great literature, in all that would make for good taste in dress, speech and home decoration and management would do more to fit a girl to be a Christian mother and the mistress of a Christian home.

EDUCATION FOR RURAL LIVING.

And so I come to my final point — what the country home can do to educate the child for rural living.

An American writer on the "Forward to the Land" movement, expressed the value of rural living thus: — "To live a decent, human-life a man needs space for family living, a good environment for bringing up children, one where children are welcome, the possession of property so that the family can have both independence and responsibility, and a chance for genuine community living, for true neighbourliness." Only the country can give all this. A nation can be no stronger than its families are, and they can be at their best in the country. And when to this natural strength we add the crowning glory of the Catholic Faith, when we strive to bring Christ to the countryside, and the land to Christ, we are certainly exercising a great apostolate. This is the ideal and vocation we wish to hand on to our children.

They will learn it best by living it, by being given an active share in it, while still young. If the chance to be truly responsible for what one does is one of the values of rural living, then the rural home must give each child jobs to do which he must do with faithfulness and responsibility. It is not enough that he sees, what is easily seen on a farm, that the feeding of animals, the watering of plants, the milking of cows, the gathering of eggs, the preparing of meals cannot be put aside for another day. He must share that responsibility if he is to experience the joy of a job well done. The jobs should not be burdensome to the child, but they should be really necessary jobs, and the child should be really responsible for doing them. Anyone who has had much to do with modern children, would realize their need for a sense of responsibility, and for acquiring a spirit of work and a respect for its dignity. At the same time the children will learn from sharing the family work to care for things “with reverence and detachment,” to use them properly — a very valuable lesson that is so hard to teach to the child who has to spend his growing years in a flat or in a few rented rooms.

COMMUNITY LIFE.

True neighbourliness or the spirit of genuine community living is really an extension of a sense of responsibility. It is living a truth that, as members of the Body of Christ we are almost as responsible for the goodness and happiness of others as we are for our own. “We are all one in Christ.” Someone has put it thus: “The countryman retains in his very fibre the knowledge that God’s answer to ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ is an emphatic ‘Yes’.” Children should not only see the genuine concern which their parents have for the troubles of others and their readiness to give help; they should have their share in helping. Picnics and parties and games together are the joyful side of neighbourliness; children need this, and the more serious side as well. As they grow up in the more spacious country environment, they can learn the meaning and value of quietness, serenity and solitude; but they should realize that they are never isolated, no matter how far away the nearest homestead.

From their parents, too, children learn to take an active part in parish functions and entertainments, to give time and energy to supporting movements such as the Rural Movement, or any movement or club that is working to help the Catholic boy or girl to be, in time, an intelligent and contented member of a country community.

SENSE OF VALUES.

A parent’s surest means of developing in their children this intelligent appreciation of a rural way of life, is by giving them a happy home life with parents and children sharing their interests and fun. Nothing can replace the value of that in any child’s life, but it is particularly true of the country child’s life, who at some time or other will be tempted by the seeming enchantment of city life. It can be a very strong temptation, but parents who have realized that their vocation in life is to educate their children in God’s way, will not be found wanting. Their own love for each other and for God, is the strongest foundation of happiness in the home, and that is one reason why they will keep to themselves any differences or disagreements that may arise between them. They will realize that the special home virtues of unselfishness, bearing with one another, gentleness, generosity and modesty will not come without prayer and personal effort. Each of these would be worthy of a talk on its own, but unselfish courtesy and modesty are needed by the child of today to a degree that is almost frightening — courtesy because it means a real concern for the feelings of others, a deep respect, a reverence for the person of others — and reverence, we are told, is fast disappearing from

our world. Good manners is the outward showing of courtesy and good-mannered children have good-mannered parents. — That is the only certain way.

This is true also of modesty — a person's sense of reverence for himself, his own person. Here, the father has a tremendous responsibility for the modest manliness of his sons and their respect for women; and the mother must know that her girl's womanly modesty and purity depend largely on hers. A girl nowadays, at least in the city, needs this virtue to an heroic degree, so great are the temptations to unbecoming dress and behaviour. Yet Catholic women, who knew how to dress smartly and modestly, and had the courage of their convictions, could start a revolution in this matter.

THE HOME OF A SAINT.

To end my talk, I want to quote the words of our Holy Father, the Pope, spoken when he was canonizing Saint Maria Goretti, the twelve year-old martyr of purity. — She was, he said, “the fruit of a Christian home with its old simple method of education, a home where one prays, where the children are brought up in fear of God, in obedience to parents, in the love of truth and self-respect, accustomed to be satisfied with little, and to give a helping hand.”

It was a country home, and Maria was a country child, who learnt early the meaning of sharing fully in the joys and sufferings of a family — the give and take of a family life. I have always loved the ideals of country life, and have loved teaching children from country homes. That is why I am glad and honoured to speak to you today, to get to know a little of those who make it possible for children to be truly childlike. City children have their own loveliness and perhaps a greater need of our work, but I often find myself longing to give them the tremendous benefits of growing up in the country — and that is why I think every effort should be made to establish in the country, colleges and schools that are fully Catholic and truly rural in ideals.

Our Lady was the mistress of a little village home in Nazareth; Jesus was a little village child. I know their loving spirit will guide every step the country child takes on his way to heaven.
