

CHRISTIAN FORMATION AND THE TEENAGER

By J. R. DOYLE

EVERYONE CONCERNED with the education of adolescents is deeply aware of the difficulties inherent in the continued development of conscience at this stage. In the pre-adolescent period, the child accepts, usually uncritically, his dependence on teachers and parents, his capacity for abstract thought is slight and his relationships with his fellows are more concerned with the pursuit of a mutually exciting end than with his colleagues as individual personalities.

From the age of twelve or thirteen he has to come to terms, during the ensuing four years, with a sexually maturing body. He has to learn to accept responsibility, he is increasingly able to think in the abstract, his critical faculty develops and he begins to question the assertions of the adults with whom he comes into contact – and nowhere more so than in the field of religion and morals.

It is a truism that his success in coping with this stage in his development will depend very much on his formation up to the age of puberty. The communication problems which parents, especially, meet with in their teenage children frequently date back to the pre-school stage. Early rejection quickly results in a break-down in communications. The weary father at the end of a hard day's work, who persistently, if politely, refuses to apply himself to his five year old son's railway engineering problems, or who will not find time to listen to the same son's inconsequential chatter, can hardly be surprised if the time comes when the son accepts that there is no possibility of contact and seeks confidants elsewhere. Unfortunately, many parents only discover that this has happened when the child's mischief develops into the adolescent's intransigence.

Reports by the Central Advisory Council invariably draw attention to the moral aspect of educating the adolescent, although only Newsom made any real attempt to offer advice of a realistic nature.¹

¹ *Half our Future: a report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England)* (London, 1963).

It is pertinent to quote from one such report, Crowther,¹ which, having reminded readers that the Education Act of 1944 imposes on Local Education Authorities the obligation to 'contribute towards the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community', goes on to assert:

The teenagers with whom we are concerned need, perhaps before all else, to find a faith to live by. They will not all find precisely the same faith and some will not find any. Education can and should play some part in their search. It can assure them that there is something to search for and it can show them where to look and what other men have found.

The most significant Crowther comment was, of the teenagers in our schools – 'They are individual human beings and the primary concern of the schools should not be with the living they will earn but with the life they will lead'.

Vatican II's document on the laity stresses that training for the apostolate should start with a child's earliest education, that is, in the home, and continue throughout his life. Great responsibility is imposed on parents, priest and teachers: 'Schools, colleges and other catholic educational institutions . . . have the duty to develop a catholic sense and apostolic activity in young people'.²

The large catholic secondary school is then concerned with the continued formation and development of some hundreds of teenagers. They are individuals of differing backgrounds, some reasonably well formed spiritually, others with inadequate home backgrounds and little spiritual formation. Their ability range is considerable and may be affected as much by social or opportunity factors as by indifferent intellectual equipment. The home, infant and primary schools, parish, contacts with cultural life, social environment and the type of community in which they live will all have had an educative influence, good, bad and indifferent. Secondary schooling offers a new start, and a frightening challenge and responsibility face those who assume the task of formally educating these adolescents for the succeeding four or five years.

It would be unrealistic to proceed without giving consideration to the educators, their likely potential and the conditions under

¹ *15 to 18: a report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England)*, 2 vols. (London, 1959-60).

² *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 30.

which they work. Theoretically, the catholic school has every advantage possible in its efforts to create a christian community in which these young people can develop and enjoy the spiritual formation which is their right.

This pre-supposes a teaching staff of dedicated men/women, well prepared for their task, with a clear idea of their aims, enjoying the closest co-operation with parents, priests and other formal educative influences in the community around them. It assumes that the teachers are catholics and that they are fully alive to the fact that the disciplines which they are concerned to teach are subordinate to the full development of their pupils. In turn this means that such teachers will have been well-grounded in catechetics, sociology and psychology, and that they have a strong personal faith.

The fact of the matter is that the secondary sector of catholic education in Britain has developed so quickly that it has not been possible to match this with a corresponding recruitment of suitable staff and effective study of the best way of organising the schools. One result is that most catholic secondary schools are staffed by both catholics and non-catholics. In an age of considerable career opportunity, there has been little apparent effort to recommend the vocation of teaching to the best students leaving our catholic schools, whilst at the same time there has been a sad depletion in the ranks of the dedicated, single woman teacher. In both catholic and non-catholic schools, little effort has been made to train the potential headteacher for a management post of considerable importance. There is still little beyond sporadic and limited department courses to fill this gap, when, obviously, what is required is something on the lines of the Army Staff College. As lay leadership in the catholic secondary sector is a comparatively new thing, it has meant that there has been a lack of adequately prepared people to take the lead in our secondary schools.

There is still a backlog of non-co-operation to be dealt with. A catholic secondary school invariably caters for a population from a wide geographical area, involving a number of parishes, and creating communication problems of some magnitude. Where the parochial school often enjoyed the benefit of having the school staff drawn from the parish, it is now true that many secondary school staff live outside the catchment area, thereby limiting the extent of their extra-curricular contact with pupils, parents and priests.

If a school is to exercise its creative aspect vis-a-vis the community, and this would seem to be an essential factor in the full development

of the pupils, the catholic school has the disadvantage of a less coherent community on which to react.

All this sounds rather like an apologia. It is not intended to be so. It is important to be aware of the limiting factors which affect the catholic secondary school.

It is incumbent upon the school to create the right conditions, atmosphere, curriculum opportunities and community contacts which will combine to achieve the full spiritual formation of the pupils. Fundamentally, this is a person-to-person task. This will vary from an awareness of 'the call of the hero', with Bergson's corollary that 'the saints and the martyrs are the true educators of mankind', to a consciousness of Maritain's 'extra-educational spheres' which exert an influence on young people often more important than that exerted in the field of formal education. He describes this extra-education sphere as:

the entire field of human activity, particularly everyday work and pain, hard experience in friendship and love, social customs, law, the common wisdom embodied in the behaviour of the people, the inspiring radiance of art and poetry, the penetrating influence of religious feasts and liturgy.¹

The over-riding task is to recruit and mould good teachers; good not only in their ability to lead their pupils to an understanding of their subject, but also in their ability to see their charges as individuals, to be constantly aware of their moods, their health and their security. Such teachers need to make themselves aware of the background of each pupil, to have contact with the parents where possible, to be concerned, in fact, with pastoral welfare as much as with physical and mental well-being. Those members of staff who are not catholics must still be made to feel a vital part of the christian team, which indeed they are. Invariably they are christians. Almost invariably, their reaction to being members of the staff of a catholic school is to aim for personal standards of a very high order. I have yet to encounter one who is not eager to play his part in the spiritual life of the school. One finds they have much to offer in the language and conduct of the morning act of worship. They are often more alive to the merely humanistic aspects of school life, and they react favourably to the generally good atmosphere of an essentially catholic staff-room.

¹ Maritain, J.: *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven, 1957), p 25.

There is a danger that our schools over-estimate the extent of their influence and under-value the co-operation of parents and priests. The large school must have a form of pastoral organization to ensure the welfare of the individual child. The wise headteacher will ensure that this overflows into the home and the parish. The appointment of school chaplains was the first step towards this. It might be of interest to quote a typical pastoral framework in a school which, not being purpose-built for comprehension, selected the year as the unit for pastoral care.

Each year has a year master, a year mistress and a year chaplain. These three persons remain with that group of pupils throughout their school career. The chaplain in each year is a member of the parochial clergy who devotes part of each week to his school duties. Most important of all, he is *extra vires* as it were, being appointed by the bishop and not by the Local Education Authority. Thus he is not concerned with internal discipline and, if effective, he can become a friend and confidant of the pupils in his year. By remaining with the same group for four to seven years, there is every hope that the year masters and chaplain will be able to establish a close relationship with the pupil, his home and family and with his parish clergy. A good understanding with the parochial clergy will permit the chaplain to carry out home visiting.

Within the school, the chaplain is not a teacher in the formal sense. He is very much a contact man. His effectiveness will be in proportion to his ability to establish good relations with staff, pupils and parents. His work will demand complete sympathy and co-operation from the teachers. Time-tables will have to be fashioned to give him scope. He must be able to see pupils individually, preferably at their behest. He must be able to have a record system and some secretarial assistance: therefore he needs his own room. The spiritual life of the school, as his primary concern, must be inspired by him. He must be given every opportunity to achieve contact with the parishes around him, to see parochial groups of children, to work with those pupils who are about to leave school and to organize essentially spiritual affairs such as retreats, missions, etc. Much of this has to be done during the normal school day and he needs to be a diplomat if he is to get every assistance from the teaching staff.

His impact upon the teachers is, perhaps, of prime importance. He will need to meet them informally, to gain their confidence to the extent that he can influence their handling of individual children

and their work in the spiritual formation of these children, and indeed to inspire them with a sense of their vocation, should this be necessary. Above all, he needs to have the closest contact and understanding with the year master. Finally, his relations with his clerical colleagues may demand even more diplomacy and yet, on occasion, will be vital to the interests of the pupils who are his concern.

The word 'communication' must be one of the most over-used words in the language, but communication is the key to educative success. The teacher has the task of finding the language, whether of word or action, to convey to his pupils his own acknowledgment of the ultimate questions of truth, conscience and faith and to lead them to see Christ and to get to know him, as has been said, '... in his neighbour, in his enemy, in a thousand ways in daily life'. By implication, the teacher must be aware of his pupils' likely reactions.

Someone has said that 'uncertainty' is the key word applicable to the adolescent. The parent and teacher see this in the teenager's rebellion, withdrawal, anxiety, aggression, doubts, fears, illogical choice of companions and, sometimes, excessively anti-social behaviour. He is suddenly becoming acutely aware of people – he likes or dislikes, loves or hates, approves or disapproves. A wise and restrained reaction to his behaviour will pave the way to understanding.

Throughout he is, unconsciously, looking for a personal ideal. He looks for qualities which he sees as desirable. His values are not perhaps well formed enough to discern essentially 'good' as opposed to essentially 'bad' qualities. Indeed if he is of low intelligence he may, unhappily, seek his personal ideal in anti-social groupings. From being a child, very self-centred, he becomes helpful, considerate and generous to those for whom he cares. This is surely the starting point for getting him to see Christ in others. The teacher has to realise that this search for an ideal is as likely to be directed at a father, mother, sister, brother, teacher or prefect as to a colleague of the same age. There is nothing unhealthy in this attachment, usually to a person of the same sex. It passes, and the young person generally will emerge more mature and more spiritually sensitive, provided no misguided adult has interfered in a negative way. After all, for a time, an adolescent idealizing an adult is being a disciple and, if the situation is handled naturally, a teaching opportunity is created.

Spiritual formation for the adolescent is education for responsibility. Indeed, all education is for responsibility. Our concern is to bridge the gap between the freedom from responsibility for oneself,

which is a feature of childhood, and the self-responsibility which the teenager begins to realise and to assume.

Television, radio, newspapers, books and the wider contacts which the adolescent has in the modern world stimulate his enquiring nature. It is essential for the formal educator to realise this, and to try to bring his pupils to truth by welcoming their questioning, respecting their reasoning powers and giving their generous impulses full rein. If the teacher can answer their questing, they will want to do God's will; and this will be the sign that they are developing a responsible and free conscience.

So far no particular mention has been made of the teaching of religion in the secondary school. It is perhaps in this sphere that most harm has been done and most good might have been expected. At the dawn of 1968, I gather that even parochial clergy face their potential converts with some trepidation. The trained teacher is feverishly trying to re-orientate himself to the teaching of religion. Recently, archbishop Beck of Liverpool, in a speech to catholic teachers, put it this way:

The apostolate of the teacher is . . . clearer to us today than ever before. He not only influences his pupils by the quality of his life, but he must help them to the fulness of God's revelation, and this means a deeper understanding of the way God reveals himself to mankind as man is on his pilgrim way.

Within the past year, two religious syllabuses for catholic secondary schools have been published by Derek Lance and by Fr David Konstant respectively.¹ Perhaps the term syllabus has overtones which are unacceptable; in fact both set out to be 'guides' rather than to lay down a very set, non-selective course of study. I mention them as they are both worthy of some attention by anyone concerned with teaching in secondary schools. The problem for the teacher and the school is to be discreet in the amount of time allotted, to adapt a syllabus to the differing levels of intelligence, to be aware of the relevance of the matter taught to the everyday lives of each individual child, and to be wary of allowing aspects such as salvation history to become mere history. The greatest problem of all is to re-educate teachers to their task and to break away from traditional ideas of organization: for example, that religion is always taken by the class teacher.

¹ Lance, D.: *Eleven to sixteen* (London, 1967); Konstant, D.: *A Syllabus of Religious Instruction for Catholic Secondary Schools* (London, 1967).

As with all other subjects on the curriculum, religion has its head of department. This person occupies a unique position. It has always been admitted that every teacher is a teacher of english. The New-som report reminds us that teachers 'can only escape from their influence over the moral and spiritual development of their pupils by closing their schools. As long as they teach at all, whether they give formal lessons or not, they teach by the way they behave, by what they are'. Thus the head of the religion department must be a central and inspiring figure. It falls to him (or her), in conjunction with the chaplain(s), to co-operate with the principal in extending the classroom work of the department into the full life of the school, and even into the life of the community which the school serves.

At the heart of the problem of spiritual development stands the parent. If we accept this, then it becomes more than ever important to take positive steps to see that the parent enjoys the closest links with his child's formal education from the earliest years. The secondary school particularly has a job of parent-education to do; and it must be accepted that it can often be done only by home visiting, by parents' meetings within their own parish area and through the medium of parish clergy. This will range from educating parents to deal with the problem of giving their children instruction in sexual matters to involving them, with their children, in religious practice.

I have had much to say about communications. To illustrate the importance of home-school links may I quote two recent cases where a break-down in communication resulted in grave harm to children. Child A became noticeably unsettled. From being an attractive, responsive girl, very involved in a number of school activities, she became quiet, sulky, uncommunicative, and her work and behaviour deteriorated rapidly. It was twelve months before the mother's elaborate precautions to conceal the fact that the husband had left home failed. It was possible from that point to do something to help the girl – who was able to respond to the efforts of someone who tried to understand and share her grief.

A similar case occurred in which the mother left home. Her daughter was expected by her father to run the home (there were younger children) efficiently, whilst at the same time being given neither the sympathy which the affair demanded nor any of the privileges which the girl's new responsibilities justified. Again, the matter did not come to light for some months – entirely due to the false pride of the father, who had forbidden his daughter to inform anyone of her mother's desertion.

All this indicates at a very human level how essential it is that the strongest possible efforts to achieve a close and active link with parents is fundamental to a school's efforts to foster the full development of its pupils.

If the adolescent is to develop within the spiritual environment of his family, namely the parish, it is essential that there be liaison between the parish and the school. This is not only a question of the parish clergy using the facilities of the school for periodic meetings with the young members of their flock; it also demands contact between the school and parish organizations which offer these teenagers the prospect of action within their parish boundaries. Further, if the school initiates voluntary community activity, this will need to be co-ordinated at parish level. Finally, in this area, the school's influence in the field of liturgy and the celebration of church festivals will be in vain if the young people are not actively involved in their own parish. The difficulties attendant upon parish liaison are evident, but not, I believe, insuperable.

Grave doubts have been cast in recent years upon the effectiveness of the catholic secondary school. Minor dabblings in research, such as Mr Spencer's Downside Symposium¹ and the frightening finds of the Schofield report,² especially its development in relation to catholic adolescents, present a gloomy picture. It is gratifying that here we are seriously considering the spiritual formation of adolescents as a whole. Perhaps one of the mistakes has been to overlook the real purpose of the catholic school – to see it merely as a county school plus, instead of seeing it as a community in its own right, with its own unique ideals – a potential powerhouse within the community. It may be that, hitherto, our schools have been too concerned for order at the expense of allowing our young people to develop and to apply the natural teenage enthusiasms, innate generosity and deep, if barely expressed, need to find truth through enquiry.

In the ultimate, it is as much the spiritual formation of teachers as anything which will ensure a fruitful apostolate at the school level. It is certain that until much more than lip-service is given to the concept of christian education as a whole process – a large part of which occurs in the pre-school stage – the effectiveness of the catholic school will be in doubt. No doubt it is utopian to look for a gran-

¹ Spencer, A. E. C. W., 'An Evaluation of Roman Catholic Educational Policy in England and Wales' in *Religious Education: Drift or Decision*, ed. Jebb, P., O.S.B., (London, 1968), pp 165–221.

² Schofield, M.: *The sexual behaviour of young people* (London, 1965).

diose apostolate of this kind demanding, as it does by implication, a positive home-parish-school link throughout. It does seem reasonable to suppose that only a vision of this breadth can ensure any adequate spiritual formation for that over-large number of children who leave school and church at the same time.

N.B. The terms of reference of the Newsom report (*Half Our Future*) were: 'To consider the education between the ages of 13 and 16 of pupils of average or less than average ability who are or who will be following full-time courses either at schools or in establishments of further education. The term education shall be understood to include extra-curricular activities'.

The 1944 Education Act (sometimes known as 'the Butler Act') was a new charter for education in the United Kingdom. It embodied, among other things, the raising of the school-leaving age (as soon as may be) to 15 and ultimately to 16, secondary education for all (the beginnings of the tri-partite-system), assistance towards building costs in non-provided schools, abolition of fees in maintained schools and various ancillary provisions relating to meals, footwear and clothing.

The statutory school-leaving age was raised to 15 in 1947. It had been intended to raise this to 16 in 1970-71. This has recently been postponed for a further two years.