

JESUIT SCHOOLS AND THE APOSTOLATE TO THE UNBELIEVER

By GERARD W. HUGHES

I SUPPOSE you realize you're wasting your time: half of us are atheists'. This remark was addressed to me at the end of a religious education class by a sixteen-year-old pupil in a jesuit college. However, this paper does not offer solutions to the faith problems of catholic pupils in our jesuit schools. Instead, I shall propose some questions on the purpose of our jesuit educational apostolate today.

Teachers in jesuit colleges are usually busy people, so busy that we are easily irritated by the outsider who asks 'What is the justification for your apostolate in this school?' Recently I was a member of a working party discussing the future of a jesuit college. As we were all very busy people, we formulated our questions quickly and found instant answers. We asked: 'Does this college answer a need? Does it answer it well?' We answered: 'There are two applicants for every available place, so we are answering a need. Our public examination record is relatively good, many of the professional men in the city are former pupils, besides a large number of priests and not a few bishops. So we are answering the need well'.

We were all too busy to examine the assumptions implicit in our questions and answers. If there is a need, does it follow that we should try to answer it? What criteria have we for choosing ministries? When we say that our examination results are relatively good, why do we elect this criterion for assessing the value of our educational apostolate? When we point to professional men, bishops and priests as evidence of a need well answered, by what standard are we assessing our apostolate? If the answers to the questions had been, 'We have a large number of empty places in our school, we have a miserable record in public examinations, more of our former pupils are in prison than in the professions and more are unemployed than employed', would it necessarily follow that we should abandon the school?

In his meditation on the Two Standards in the Spiritual Exercises, St Ignatius contrasts the strategy of Satan with the strategy of Christ. Satan instructs his demons to go out over the whole world 'so that

read more at www.theway.org.uk

no province, no place, no state of life, no individual is overlooked' — and goads them on to lay snares for men and bind them with chains. First they are to tempt them to covet riches that they may the more easily attain the empty honours of this world, and then come to overweening pride. The first step then will be riches, the second honour, the third pride.¹ Christ, on the other hand, instructs all his servants and friends to help all men — first to the highest spiritual poverty and even to actual poverty. Secondly they should lead men to a desire for insults and contempt, for humility springs from these.

Therefore, on these criteria, it is possible that the school with the good examination results and successful former pupils should be closed, while the school with its former pupils in prison or unemployed, should continue.

In the Jesuit Constitutions, Ignatius gives the criteria we should use in choosing apostolates. One criterion is:

The more universal the good is, the more it is divine. Therefore preference ought to be given to those persons and places which, through their own improvement, become a cause which can spread the good accomplished to many others who are under their influence or take guidance from them.²

Ignatius accepted the education of lay students as a jesuit apostolate in the hope that these pupils would then go out and spread Christ's Kingdom. The early Jesuits had something new to offer in education and they were answering a need which no one else could answer at that particular time. Ignatius was a man of his time. The spread of Christ's Kingdom was the spread of the Roman Catholic Church and the return of the heretics to the one true fold. Government was monarchic and society was organized hierarchically. In these circumstances to educate catholic youth, who were likely to be in positions of influence later, was in accordance with Ignatius's criterion, 'the more universal the good is, the more it is divine'.

Yet even in the seventeenth century Jesuits could conceive of schools which were not for Catholics only. In 1687 the Jesuits opened a school in Edinburgh. The following quotations are from its charter.

Rules of the schools of the Royal College at Holyrood House . . . scholars shall be taught *gratis*. . . . These schools are common to all, of what condition soever, and none shall be excluded. . . . And although youths of different professions, whether Catholic or Protestant, come to

¹ Puhl, L. J. S.J.: *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* (Chicago, 1970).

² *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, sec 622d, trans. G. Ganss.

these schools, yet in teaching all there shall be no distinction made, but all shall be taught with equal diligence and care, and everyone shall be taught with equal diligence and care, and everyone shall be promoted according to his deserts. There shall not be, either by masters or scholars, any tampering or meddling to persuade anyone from the profession of his own religion; but there shall be all freedom for everyone to practise what religion he shall please, and none shall be less esteemed or favoured for being of a different religion from others. None shall upbraid or reproach anyone on account of religion; and when any exercise of religion shall be practised, as hearing Mass, catechizing or preaching, or any other, it shall be lawful for any Protestant, without any molestation or trouble, to absent himself from such public exercise if he pleases. . . . '3

In Britain today there are six Jesuit schools, three of them are fee-paying, all six are, with a very few exceptions, for Catholics only. Are we convinced that in today's very changed circumstances we are following Ignatius's maxim 'the more universal the good is, the more it is divine', by continuing to run these six schools in the same manner as before?

St Ignatius was a missionary at heart. In the Two Standards meditation he pictures Christ sending his servants and friends to all men. Ignatius sent the early Jesuits to all men, to India, Japan, Africa, America, even to Ireland. In Europe the majority of men were either Catholic or Protestant. Ignatius sent his men to both. Nadal, who knew Ignatius so well, wrote that the Spiritual Exercises can be given not only to Catholics, but also to Protestants and even to pagans, provided they believe in one God.

We live in twentieth-century Britain, which is said to be post-Christian. Catholics form 10 per cent of the total population. Our history has tended to make us a conservative Church, more intent on preserving our faith than on spreading it. We appear to the non-Catholic as a Church with a discipline (Sunday Mass and no contraception or abortion) rather than a Church with a vision. Men and women in Britain today are hungering for a spirituality, for a meaning to life. The Youth Revolution of the 'sixties and early 'seventies was a cry for meaning, for a spirituality. The Catholic Church, as outsiders see it, has no answer to offer to their needs and questions. The 32nd Jesuit General Congregation in 1975, in its decree on Mission, states, 'Too often we are insulated from any real contact with unbelief and

³ Quotation from 'The Jesuits in Scotland' in *Letters and Notices of the English Jesuit Province*, vol 65 (November 1960).

with the hard consequences of injustice and oppression. As a result, we run the risk of not being able to hear the cry for the gospel as it is addressed to us by the men and women of our time'.⁴ Busily engaged in running our own colleges for Catholic pupils in Britain, we can very easily become deaf and blind to the needs of our time.

The 32nd General Congregation states, 'The gospel demands a life free from egoism, and self-seeking and from all attempt to exploit one's fellow men'.⁵ The Jesuit General, Fr Pedro Arrupe, in a speech given to jesuit former pupils, said,

Today our prime educational objective must be to form men-for-others, men who will live not for themselves, but for God and his Christ, for the God-man lived and died for all the world; men who cannot even conceive of the love of God which does not include love for the least of their neighbours, men completely convinced that love of God which does not issue in justice is a farce. . . . This kind of education goes directly counter to the prevailing educational trend everywhere in the world. First, let me ask you this question. Have we Jesuits educated you for justice? If the terms 'justice' and 'education for justice' carry all the depth of meaning which the Church gives them, we have not educated you for justice.⁶

In our jesuit schools in Britain are we educating our pupils for justice? What are we to do? More emphasis on the third world, on voluntary service in the immediate neighbourhood of the school? I believe we are called to something much more radical.

What is involved in this 'education for justice'? It is not simply a question of information, although information is essential, about the relation of the first two worlds to the third. Information on its own does not change attitudes. We have been bombarded with information in the media about the third world for the last ten years, but the gap between wealthy and poor countries has widened. Within our own country we have had lots of information about the fate of the homeless, but the numbers of homeless have increased. The problem is much deeper than factual ignorance and the root of the problem is not in the third world. It is with us in Britain and it is within each of us. It is a problem of the heart as well as of the head. Our heads are over educated, our hearts and our feelings neglected, and so we cannot relate humanly to each other. We take it for granted in our

⁴ General Congregation 32, 'Our Mission Today', sec 35 in *Supplement to The Way*, nos 29/30, (Spring 1977), p 28.

⁵ *Ibid.*, sec 18, p 23.

⁶ Pedro Arrupe S.J., Rome. *Men For Others* (Press and Information Office, Rome).

education that competition is a good thing, 'brings the best out of a boy'. Yes, it certainly can do so, but often at the expense of another boy's dignity. Wealth and status are the rewards for winning. These rewards do spur men on to achieve, but they can also corrupt them, and corrupt society. Jesuit schools are inevitably caught up in this system.

Secondary education in Britain is controlled, organized and directed not according to children's needs or to the needs of the community, but by the demands of an examination system. Schools, teachers and pupils are assessed, and so come to assess themselves, against their results in public examinations, which give entrance for the privileged few to universities and colleges of further education. Therefore the majority of pupils are judged, and so judge themselves, to be educational failures. The more sensitive child is educated in diffidence, the less sensitive reacts with sullen non-co-operation or, in extreme cases, with violence. I am not suggesting that all examination systems should be abolished, still less saying that academic excellence is unimportant, but I am saying that an education which emphasizes the head at the expense of the heart and feelings, which so emphasizes the importance of examination success that children come to assess themselves and each other on this criterion, and an education which so stresses competition that children are encouraged to beat rather than to co-operate with each other, is a system which nurtures greed. If we take justice seriously then we cannot run our own schools in accordance with that system. We live in a society which accepts competition uncritically and so we have a society which favours the strong and able, while the weak suffer. We call this system 'freedom' and justify our independent schools in the name of 'freedom of choice'. An English boy, educated in China until the age of fourteen and then educated in England, was asked to comment on the two systems. 'In China', he answered 'we were taught to co-operate with each other. In England we are taught to compete against each other and to help each other is considered cheating'.

Alvin Toffler, in his book, *Future Shock*⁷ says that tomorrow's illiterate will not be the man who cannot read; he will be the man who has not learned to unlearn. To face future shock children must be taught to be more adaptable, able to learn and unlearn and, above all, they will require a deep inner life, self-knowledge and a strong self-identity if they are to survive future shock.

⁷ Toffler, Alvin: *Future Shock* (Pan Books, 1973).

So far I have suggested that our schools should be open to non-catholics, should go against the prevailing trend in education by emphasizing co-operation rather than competition and should aim to prepare pupils against future shock.

St Ignatius's annotations, preliminary observations to the Spiritual Exercises, contain educational principles which, if taken seriously, could revolutionize our educational methods. The early Jesuits were innovators, were accused of being excessively humanist, and became the educators of catholic Europe. They were men steeped in the Exercises. They experimented and took risks. Later generations of Jesuits became established, took a vicarious delight in the achievements of their predecessors, remained faithful to the methods and customs of old, but did not discern the signs of the times. Jesuit educators were no longer innovators, but traditionalists. Supporters of jesuit schools in Britain today will claim that the teaching is usually methodical and thorough, that jesuit schools are good for getting the best out of the average boy and that 'they teach a boy discipline', by which they mean that the boy will have to learn to obey rules and regulations, otherwise he will be punished. Some supporters will claim that the religious education is good. No one would accuse our colleges of being exciting, of pioneering educational methods, of being innovators, of being imaginative, yet the Spiritual Exercises contain principles which could revolutionize education.

In the 2nd annotation, Ignatius warns the director against burdening the retreatant with too much information.

The one who explains to another the method and order of meditating and contemplating should narrate accurately the facts of the contemplation or meditation. Let him adhere to the points, and add only a short or summary explanation. The reason for this is that when one in meditating takes the solid foundation of the facts and goes over it and reflects on it for himself, he may find something that makes them a little clearer or better understood. . . . Now this produces greater spiritual relish and fruit than if the one giving the Exercises had explained and developed the meaning at great length. For it is not much knowledge which fills and satisfies the soul, but the intimate understanding and relish of the truth.⁸

'Let them discover for themselves' is a summary of this annotation. We Jesuits ignored its truth for centuries, when we abandoned the individually directed retreat in favour of the collective

⁸ Exx 2.

'preached retreat'. We forgot it, too, in education, while the secular world discovered it. I know of a primary school in a very depressed city area, where discipline was the major problem and corporal punishment the only answer, until a new headmaster arrived who took the principle 'let them discover for themselves' seriously, and the school was transformed. The problem was no longer how to make the children work, but how to get them to stop working, and there was no need for corporal punishment. Secondary school teachers recognize the truth of this principle, but claim that it is impossible in practice. It would demand major changes in the administration of the school, would put strain on teachers who have not been trained for this kind of education and it would be unfair to the pupils to jeopardize their examination chances by experimenting with new methods. Our own jesuit schools are in the same difficulty. We can acknowledge the truth of the principle 'let them discover for themselves', but we cannot practise it except in a very limited way. If this is our conclusion, do we really believe the principle? It is basic to the Exercises, basic to our belief in human freedom and human dignity. Where are our priorities?

In the 4th annotation, Ignatius describes how the Exercises are divided into four parts, or 'weeks', but he warns the director that some people may take a longer time, some a shorter time over each stage, and that some should not go beyond the first week. There is no virtue, in Ignatius's mind, in covering the syllabus. How life could be enriched if we really took this principle seriously, giving priority to the needs of the individual pupil rather than to the needs of his parents, the good name of the school, the demands of the examination system. A. S. Neill in his book *Summerhill*, says that as a headmaster he was happier to produce a contented road sweeper than a neurotic scholar. Ignatius would have agreed with him. Can we really put this principle into practice in our schools as we have them today?

In the 5th annotation, Ignatius gives the basic attitude required in any person who wants to make the Exercises with profit. They are also the basic attitudes for openness to God, to men and to life. 'It will be very profitable for the one who is to go through the Exercises to enter upon them with magnanimity and generosity toward his Creator and Lord'.⁹ In all our christian education we must try to create the conditions most favourable for eliciting those qualities of magnanimity and generosity which are in us. They are basic human

⁹ Exx 5.

qualities, to be caught rather than taught. The most lasting lessons in school are not learned in the classroom but in the values which are absorbed almost unconsciously, by a kind of osmosis. For example, if the best teachers are always allocated to the brightest pupils, the school soon gets the message that it is brains which count. Prizes and marks confirm the impression that human worth is to be measured by ability to pass examinations. I heard a jesuit pupil give his mother a run-down on the personalities in his school photograph. 'He's terrifically brainy and always gets top marks. He's an absolute dud and gets everything wrong. He's pretty dim but spends hours on his homework'. The speaker then retired to his room to write out the beatitudes ten times, a punishment inflicted for his poor performance in catechism that morning. Is it practical to structure a school in such a way that the headmaster really is the servant of his staff and pupils and parents, the staff really are the servants of the pupils and the pupils learn to serve each other? Is it possible to have a school in which prefects have no privileges, senior members of staff have extra responsibility but no corresponding increment in salary, in which teaching staff, caretakers, cleaners all enjoy the same status. 'Any one who wants to be great among you must be your servant'.¹⁰ The only school I have ever heard of which tried to put these ideas into practice was a non-christian school.

At the heart of the Spiritual Exercises is Ignatius's belief that God acts on us through our feelings and emotions and that it is through discernment of these that we can come to know who God is and who we are. To repress and stifle these emotions is to dehumanize ourselves, cripple our spiritual powers and so silence God. Does our system of education, the administration and organization of our schools encourage pupils and staff to be in touch with their own feelings and emotions? Do we create the atmosphere of mutual trust and acceptance in which this is possible, or does the stress and strain of school life make us consider this question a piece of idealist nonsense? We must get on with the job of helping our pupils 'to get on', keep a stiff upper lip and a smile on our face, even though there are tears in our hearts, and teach them to do the same. What kind of school would we run if we really believed that the most important thing which any of us can learn is to love and be loved, to respect the other simply because he is a human being and to be at one with him so that his pain is my pain, his joy is mine? Would it be a school with its own

¹⁰ Mt 20, 26.

separate buildings and professional teaching staff, or can we envisage a school where all the community feel responsible for the children in some way, where the children can learn from the postman, the milkman, the carpenter, the mechanic, as well as from the university graduate?

I conclude with two practical suggestions. The first is that those who are engaged in teaching in our jesuit schools should ask themselves, both individually and as a community, whether they are convinced that their work is in accord with the Exercises, the criteria for choosing ministries given in the Constitutions, the ideals expressed in the 32nd General Congregation and in Fr Arrupe's letters. The answer to that question is not to be found in the reasons that we adduce for or against what we are doing. The beginnings of an answer are to be found in the feelings and emotions which we experience, especially when we pray and discuss the question, and it is these feelings that we must learn to discern. Secondly, I suggest that a few Jesuits should be found, interested in the educational apostolate, who would be willing to live together in some city and work in separate state comprehensive schools, including non-catholic schools. We cannot speak to the confusion of our times unless we share in it. Living together, they can pray and reflect together on their experience, share it in conversation and in writing with other Jesuits engaged in our own schools, and with other teachers. Working in state comprehensives which they do not control nor enjoy any privileged status, they will feel frustration and helplessness, an important spiritual experience. Perhaps in the end they will conclude that the only way in which we can contribute anything to education in Britain is by running our own schools. On the other hand, they may experience what the early jesuits experienced when they launched themselves into apparently impossible situations following the criterion, 'the more universal the good is, the more it is divine'. They found that the result of their work seemed quite out of proportion to the means they employed. 'Unless you lose your life, you cannot find it'.¹¹ So I pray that some of us can leave our own colleges and 'have the humility and courage to walk with the poor'¹² and 'learn from what they have to teach us what we can do to help them'.¹³

¹¹ Lk 9, 24.

¹² General Congregation 32, 'Our Mission Today', sec 50, p 31.

¹³ *Ibid.*, sec 50.