

TEACHING RELIGION

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HE progress of Catholic education in the United States is a remarkable indication of the energy and the zeal which the Church continues to bring to this important apostolate. The sacred obligation to give Catholic youth a true and worthy education, is being discharged with dynamic activity. Catholic educators are aware of the necessity of bringing all the activities of the Catholic school into closer harmony with the sane principles of a true Catholic philosophy of education. The scrutinizing investigation of problems, together with the reiteration of the principles to be utilized in their solution, is fortunately resulting in the introduction of more efficient organization and more effective technique. Perhaps the most gratifying of all these endeavors are the very positive strides made to raise the teaching of religion to the high standard which it rightly merits.

Of all the tasks involved in the aims set for Catholic education, none is more fundamental than that of providing the pupil with a practical moral training, and "since the duties we owe our Creator take precedence of all other duties, moral training must accord the first place to religion, that is, to the knowledge of God and His law, and must cultivate a spirit of obedience to His commands. The performance, sincere and complete, of religious duties, ensures the fulfillment of other obligations."¹ Toward a more thorough accomplishment of this task, courses in religious instruction are being revamped, text-books better adapted to the needs of the pupil are being used, and teachers are receiving more specific instruction in regard to aims, methods, and organization in this branch. In conjunction with the teaching of religion, definite steps are being taken in the field of character formation, the inculcation of attitudes and habits, which will go far toward giving the pupil that equipment which will allow him to make his religious knowledge functionable in the affairs of his daily life. These are well in order, for all the

¹ *Pastoral Letter of the Archbishops and Bishops of the United States (1919).*

powers of the child need to be recognized in the educative process. The emotions must be directed and brought under the dominance of the will. Will-power needs development for, to become a permeating force in life, any ideal must first be willed. All the activities and projects in character and religious formation are to be coordinated, and since this is so, it is to be kept in mind that the basis for such training is to be found on the intellectual side, namely in the "knowledge of God and His law."

Knowledge is the foundation, for "only upon a solid foundation of knowledge in which doctrines rather than devotions are stressed may the teacher confidently undertake to rear the superstructure of reverence towards God and of obedience to His commands."² This knowledge can be obtained adequately only through that assimilation which is the product of discursive thought. If the assimilation of religious truth were made a medium for the development of the power of thinking, and at same time, the development of thinking power were made a medium for the assimilation of religious truth, then a proper and thorough knowledge of religious truth would be gained by the pupil. It is well known that in the normal development of the mental process, the pupil, from the time he starts his school life until the time he leaves, shows striking evidence of his power to think. For this reason, he is never to be treated as being without this power. Since the pupil's thinking power develops through activity and at times shows noticeable acceleration, it is true that his learning can and should become more and more intellectual.

At every step in the process of development, there is demand for the application of the principles involved in all learning. From St. Thomas, we know that it is fundamental that "God must be recognized without figure of speech and independently of any appeal to piety or mysticism as our first and principal teacher," and that we depend upon Him "as the source of those luminous principles to which we refer the findings of discursive thought."³ Remembrance of this and reflection upon the fact that God is the alpha and omega of religious teaching, should give all those actively concerned in religious education a weighty reason for a greater confidence in divine help. God

² Sister Josephine Mary, S. N. D., "Religion in the Elementary School." *Thought* III (1929) No. 4, p. 612.

³ Doctor E. A. Pace, "Saint Thomas' Theory of Education," *Catholic University Bulletin* VIII (1902) No. 3, p. 295.

as our first teacher provides the beginnings, the first premises for all knowledge, for, from these luminous universal principles, all knowledge follows as from germinal capacities. As our efficient sustaining Cause, God aids the further advance in knowledge made through the activity of the pupil and the ministrations of the teacher. St. Thomas clearly shows wherein the pupil is active and in what consists the function of the teacher.

The pupil learns largely in proportion to his self-activity. "Knowledge exists in the learner in active potentiality," for the mind is led to know particular things in actuality which before were known potentially. "There is a two-fold manner of acquiring knowledge, the one when the natural reason of itself comes to a knowledge of the unknown, which is called 'discovery,' the other when someone extrinsically gives aid to the natural reason, which is called 'instruction.'"⁴ The mode of instruction must conform to the mode of discovery. St. Thomas further tells us that the one teaching "leads another to a knowledge of the unknown in the same way as he (the learner) would lead himself to a cognition of the unknown in discovery. . . . The teacher proposes to another by means of symbols the discursive process which he himself goes through by natural reason, and thus the natural reason of the pupil comes to a cognition of the unknown through the aid of what is proposed to him as with the aid of instruments."⁵ In this we see the importance of the teacher's recognition of the spontaneous processes of the mind. The teacher assists the pupil who by his own activity comes to a cognition of truth. The pupil is the recognized agent in the process, which is guided and stimulated by the teacher. The pupil builds his intellectual edifice along the lines indicated by the teacher. This edifice will be sound, adequate and orderly largely in proportion to the wisdom of the teacher's direction.

The learning process in any particular instance therefore is initiated by the teacher, who draws the pupil's attention to a definite idea. This is done by the presentation of meaningful symbols, "for when we wish to help some one to understand something we lay examples before him from which he forms phantasms for the purpose of understanding."⁶ These symbols

⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas. *De Veritate (Quaestiones Disputatae)*, Q. XI, *De Magistro*, art 1. For English translation of *De Magistro*, see *The Philosophy of Teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas* by M. H. Mayer. (Milwaukee, 1929).

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *Summa Theologica*, Ia. q. 84, art. 7.

are perceptible by the senses. Images result which are the objects of reflection by which means the idea they represent is grasped by the intellect. As the intellect gets the idea, the discursive process starts immediately. By division and composition, by affirmation and denial, and subsequent identification and connection with other ideas, the mind goes from principles to conclusions. We see in this that there is a tendency toward the immediate formation of connections between the concept newly received and the body of knowledge which the mind has in possession. The connections as well as the process involved in their making are very important in the learning process. If these connections are made with vitality, with real consciousness, then we have real thinking, the basis of all learning.

The previous knowledge, that is, the "habitual" knowledge which the pupil has, must be recognized as the starting point in the process of forming associations. As St. Thomas quotes from Aristotle, "all learning comes from previous knowledge." The pupil's ability to form associations, to link the new with the old depends both upon the degree to which the new data lends itself to interpretation in the light of previous experience, and upon the manner in which this data is presented to him. The past experience, the habitual knowledge of the pupil must be utilized. In this, images play an important role, as St. Thomas shows. He says, "Our mind cannot actually consider those things which it knows habitually, without forming some phantasms."⁷ "Our intellect needs these phantasms for actual thought after it has obtained this habitual knowledge just as it did in receiving it."⁸ It is through the medium of images, that the recall of old associations bearing upon the data in hand, as well as the formation of new facile associations, is stimulated. The images should be sufficient in number and range to crowd out the distracting and the extraneous. They should be so set in array as to call forth the spontaneous concentration of the pupil's mind upon the matter in hand.

The associations made with facility link themselves with the old associations now recalled and in this way is established the first bond between the known and the unknown. Thus is opened up the gateway to the knowledge to be acquired. As the pupil realizes the need for forming other less facile associations and

⁷ *De Veritate*, q. X., *De Mente*, art. 6, corp.

⁸ *ibid.* art. 2 ad 7.

becomes aware of a gap to be bridged, he begins to approach the data problematically, to view the acquisition of the new knowledge as a personal problem. The formation of the facile associations—the facile element in the process—will serve to define and clarify the question. It calls forth and brings to the foreground all the pupil's habitual knowledge pertaining to the problem. This analysis, wherein is viewed the different points to be considered, their relation to one another and the relative importance of each, will suggest a forecasting of effort toward the goal which is the solution. Furnished with a detailed and well understood plan of attack, the pupil feels the comforting assurance that he is capable of solving the problem. Once he has the sense and the scope of the problem, he will be anxious to go further. In this way the facile element gives the first motivation.

The difficult element—the formation of less facile associations—will further accentuate this urge. Far from discouraging an attempt at solution, it will rather challenge the pupil to investigate. It will be a goad to him to complete his discovery. Becoming eager to acquire the new knowledge, to solve the problem, the pupil begins his search for facts and ideas that will serve his purpose. The motivation will be kept up throughout the discursive process for the pupil will soon discover that “nothing is as exciting as the hunt after thoughts or facts intended to elucidate a question we think vital to us.”⁹ The difficult element will also serve as a check in this that it will inhibit the tendency to go off at tangents. The pupil now having acquired a personal interest in the problem will bring his keenest powers of concentration to bear upon the situation in hand. Professor Dewey states it thus: “Demand for the solution of a perplexity is the steadying and guiding factor in the entire process of reflection . . . the problem fixes the end and the end controls the process of thinking.”¹⁰

Equipped with an understanding of the problem, a plan of attack, a strong motivation, and such primary control, the pupil sets out in his task of effecting the formation of less facile associations which he feels he must make in order to reach a satisfying conclusion. He is ready for suggestions, facts, thoughts, that will facilitate his task. The exercises which the mind goes through at this juncture are important in the forma-

⁹ Abbé Ernest Dimmet, *The Art of Thinking* (New York, 1929), p. 49.

¹⁰ *How We Think* (New York, 1910), pp. 11-12.

tion of habits of right thinking. For this reason the pupil needs guidance. The response to stimuli and the general activity of the pupil's mind at this point in any particular instance depends upon many factors, principal among which are the nature and relative complexity of the subject-matter, and the range, aptness, and number of suggestions in view of the habitual knowledge possessed by the pupil. The guidance demanded consists, on the one hand, in the arrangement of the data upon which the pupil is to work, and on the other hand, in giving the pupil clear, definite direction as to his mode of procedure. The data ought to be rich in association possibilities, fertile in ideas that lend themselves to association with those ideas formulated in the projected plan for solution. The direction consists largely in guiding the pupil's inspection and observation. He should be cautioned to deliberate in order to steer clear of haphazard jumping at conclusions. Professor Dewey thinks that "the most important factor in the training of good mental habits consists in acquiring the attitude of suspended conclusion, and in mastering the various methods of searching for new materials to corroborate or to refute the first suggestions that occur."¹¹ The pupil should be made to test his inferences as to their validity and to question their reliability as contributions to the solution of the difficulty.

This being done all along the line in the formation of the less facile associations will result in giving the pupil his own answer to his own problem, besides the training in right thinking in religious matters. If during the process, constant reference is made to the projected plan, the outcome will be a complete, well-ordered conclusion, a solution containing an adequate synthesis of the new knowledge now thoroughly integrated. Throughout the entire process, due attention must be given to the pupil's expression, oral or written, of his acquired knowledge, the results of his efforts. He should learn to use with facility that exact terminology which religious doctrine demands. Since faith and authority are intimately involved in all religious doctrine, the pupil should be made to realize that what he is seeking and what he is acquiring in the religion class is religious truth, truth in the most sublime sphere of knowledge known to man.

The teaching of religion by such a means of discursive

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 13.

thought will assure to the pupil a thorough knowledge of those truths which concern him vitally and with which he needs a personal contact. It will obviate any tendency on the part of the pupil to languish into inertia in his thinking upon religious topics. Our teaching of religion will approach that ideal so admirably embodied in the words of Doctor Cullen: "A lesson in religion ought to demand just as much reasoning as mathematics, as much imagination as literature, as much judgment as history and as much careful analysis as science, if not infinitely more than all these."¹² Religious teaching, our most important task and the cornerstone of our curricula, will then be adequate in itself and serve as a point of departure for all programs of correlation and all projects in character architecture. It will carry out the primary purpose of our strivings, namely that the pupil will learn to "live for Christ" and know the joy that comes into a life so heaven-bent.

¹² Dr. Thomas Cullen. *Catholic Educational Association Bulletin* XXI (1924) No. 1.

IN MEMORIAM

BRO. CAMILLUS RUBBA, O. P.

Friar sleep! Thy struggles o'er,
 Sleep the sleep that knows no ending,
 Dream of mission lands no more,
 Raise thy voice with martyr's blending.
 Sleep, thy valiant white-robed band
 'Neath their Father's flag are camping.
 Pulpit, cloister, heathen-land
 Throb with their triumphant tramping.
 Friars preach and virgins pray,
 Fire and sword shall never daunt them,
 Heaven's hosts in strong array
 Trumpet forth St. Dominic's anthem.