

THE ART OF THE SPOKEN WORD

BRO. HUGH HARTNETT, O. P.



OF all the gifts of God there is none more worthy of our daily thanksgiving than the gift of speech, even though the nobility of this gift is not always realized. We have such a facility and an aptitude for the interchanging of ideas that we become more or less forgetful of the fact that good speech is an art; that it is made up of thought, language, voice and visible action.

To the untrained ear that listens to a "great" speaker or a singer, there is associated an element of mystery. The artist sings or speaks with such captivating ease, it seems ridiculous that anybody could not get up and do the very same thing just as well. With that ease with which he uses his voice, is recognized upon a little analysis, the mystery of the artistic ability with which he delivers his message or delights from his repertory. But how many are there in the audience who fully appreciate his art, who value the work and the sacrifice of the artist and realize that this public appearance has cost him many years of close earnest labor. Everyone goes away pleased, with a feeling of complete satisfaction whether he acutely appreciates the niceties of the artist's work or not.

Then, conversely, there comes the painful necessity of listening to a speaker with little or no training. Immediately the observer detects that there is something wrong. The orator's diction is defective, his voice is good but poorly placed, he strains his throat and he is nasal. He distracts the audience by his absurd facial contortions and he exhausts the patient listeners by his continual shouting. These and other defects are produced unconsciously by the untrained speaker and even the uncritical listener is instinctively aware that the message is not being delivered in an artistic way.

Why has the speaker failed? He has neglected to acquaint himself with the knowledge of good elocution. He has neglected to provide for the proper management of his voice. He has neglected to secure capable guides who will instruct him in the art

of the spoken word. Truly a teacher cannot supply a rich resonant voice but he can help develop, surprisingly, that which is already there by nature. But perhaps he scoffs at the idea of training for he has heard others who have become great after a lifetime of experience and he intends to follow this beaten track alone and unguided. There are some who say elocution is needless but the truth is, born orators are rare. The best speakers of every land have recognized the importance of training. It is just as unwise to speak in public without training as it is to go into an athletic contest without previous preparation.

The early Greeks, at the time of their highest culture were keenly sensitive to the importance of surrounding their children with persons whose accent and utterance was of the purest and most refined. They would employ no servants who were not of a cultured caliber and who did not speak correctly. Little care is exercised in this regard today. In reading in Plutarch the lives of the two great orators, Demosthenes and Cicero, whose memory will live for all time, we find that they selected only masters who would help them to become persuasive and powerful speakers. Both were handicapped by physical impediments yet both became so great and mighty as to command over two thousand years of attention. Demosthenes before his training as an orator spoke so harshly and disagreeably that he was nicknamed "Argas," a poetical name for snake. His voice was weak, his diction was defective and his breath was short. Discouraged by his first attempts and almost disheartened, he was inspired by the idea that good speech was an art that brought honor and power and he determined to improve. He confined himself in a cave for the purpose of exercising his voice every day and even shaved one-half of his head so that he would not be tempted to go out in public until he had perfected his speech. His universally recognized oratorical genius is the reward of his patient labor and industry.

It is said, too, that Cicero was defective in his delivery and for that reason sought all masters who would help him. The best rhetoricians of Rome, Greece and Asia prepared him for the glory of his public career. "Neglect the study of elocution," he says, "and the highest gifts become paralyzed, while a good delivery places an inferior man above the most talented."

These two immortal characters have been mentioned to show briefly how two physically handicapped but ambitious men

became the axis of the oratorical world and acknowledged masters in oratory even to the present day. These men recognized real art as the spontaneous expression of the soul in a graceful and pleasing way and they left nothing undone in the development of perfect delivery and diction. They knew that, "Public men are in a great measure judged by their power of public speaking," long before Macauley made that memorable remark and they strained every effort to make themselves good public speakers.

Happily, however, the development of this great gift is again beginning to receive its due consideration. English speaking in America is now being recognized as a science and with its evolution is disclosed a knowledge of the startling neglect of discipline in English speech. This problem is now receiving the attention of educational centers and particularly the New York State Department of Education and the Society of American Speech in New York. The campaign for better speech has not only been waged by the schools and literary societies but railroads, telephone companies, business firms, department stores and banking houses in the large cities have felt the critical need of effective English for their employees in their daily dealings with customers and cliental. Arrangements have been made for the employees to attend classes in oral English in the hope that they will cultivate an ability to speak with greater ease and greater effect. Evidently they are not satisfied with a staff that displays but ordinary competence and have been brought face to face with the fact that the development of a cultured and well modulated voice is as important as the carefully groomed appearance of the force. It seems that Gladstone did not miss the mark when he said, "Ninety-nine men in every hundred in the crowded professions will probably never rise above mediocrity because the training of the voice is entirely neglected and considered of no importance."

Now what is the art of the Spoken Word? As we have said it comprises a fourfold character—Thought, Language, Voice and Visible Action. The good talker must think clearly with a vital understanding of the matter that he is about to express. He must convey his own thoughts or what he has intelligently appropriated from another so that his voice rings with the conviction of his own sincerity. The orator then is a living expression of the thought that he is transmitting. If thought is not

directed properly by speech then the speaker is betrayed. The tone lacks resonance and variety, the speech is not forceful, and he fails to become convincing because he does not seem to have his cause imbedded in the very roots of his soul. The speaker, therefore, must primarily learn to think with a vitality and a thoroughness of thought that must not be mistaken in his voice.

Language, of course, is the medium of communication by which thought is expressed. The speaker cannot afford to neglect such an important element that places a real value and a character on his work. Great care ought to be taken that there be no offense against good taste, using slangy English or perhaps ruining the fabric of the discourse with a tincture of vulgarity. On the other hand too much fastidious nicety of expression may not be appreciated by the auditor, for it proves a source of distraction while his attention is diverted from the thought. However, the listener wants to be pleased and the speaker who can present his ideas with a lively interest need not be fearful of the effect on the hearts and the souls of his hearers.

The accusation is sometimes made that the management and right use of the voice both in conversation and in public speaking is not given enough attention by the American. We have been branded with all sorts of caustic epithets because of our reputed disregard or ignorance of vocal efficiency. Some time ago an editorial appeared in one of our leading magazines with the bold assertion that it was generally said that the American was the most slovenly spoken person in the world. Of course it admitted the exaggeration but added that, "There is a distinct basis for the undesirable reputation. The average American is lip-lazy. Thousands of us speak back of our teeth, or through our noses, or behind our lips. We do not open our mouths when we speak; or if we do, we yell or scream. A well-modulated voice is the exception; clear enunciation is exceeding rare." He goes on to tell of his experience at an Americanization Conference held in Washington.

"Here was gathered a company largely made up of pedagogues; of men and women high in position of public instruction or education, who, in their places, were recognized as authorities in teaching; whom their communities had raised to positions where what they said counted for much in the direction of public training. Yet one could only in the exceptional instance understand what was said. During the four days of the conference

I heard over 100 persons speak from the platform and the floor. Of all these speakers only eight, by actual count, opened their lips and clearly enunciated their words. In a number of instances the speakers could not be understood within twenty feet of where they were speaking. The majority could not be heard at the back of the small auditorium.

"The humorous aspect of the situation was that each of these speakers was discussing the subject of teaching English to the foreign-born; in other words, each was teaching a language that, while undoubtedly he understood it, he could not make himself understood because of an absolute ignorance of vocal placement: of the use of the lips or the voice.

"And yet these speakers were going to be the leading factors in instructing the foreign-born! As a matter of fact, of the eight speakers, whom I counted as speaking distinctly three were-foreign-born! The American-born, the instructor of the new American, was deficient in the very element which is so vital in the work at his or her hand!"

Whether this accusation be true or not, the art of the spoken word is rapidly coming into its own. Perhaps we can give some credit to the radio for a growing realization of the value of a good voice. Nearly every one has a radio now, judging from the number of aerials on the housetops and everyone's ear is being critically attuned to those voices broadcasted every day and night. Instinctively one may recognize the merits or demerits of a voice and let us hope that there will be enough conscious introspection so that there will be some useful profit in what is heard.

The necessity of voice culture cannot be too greatly stressed whether the student is to be a statesman or a salesman, a counselor or a clerk, a missionary or a merchant. Just why the importance of vocal development is overlooked or neglected is perplexing. Perhaps it is because the good education of the voice requires such a long time, and its perfect use the good portion of a lifetime. But that is true of almost every art. The acquiring of proper breathing, tone production, vocal purity, modulation, niceties of diction, articulation, enunciation, pronunciation, eradication of defects, the use of the singing tone so important in public speaking, expression, emphasis, variety of tone, rate, and pitch is not the work of days but of years of careful cultivation. Most voices are capable of fine elocutionary

powers if thoroughly trained and perhaps after attentive observation we will not deny: "The voice is nine-tenths of the speech."

Visible action, also an important element in the art of good speaking, cannot be overlooked. Personal appearance, perfect poise, gestures of the head, face and hands must be appraised at their proper value if the speaker hopes to become successful. No sermon or speech is complete with the use of every physical motion that can be used to suggest, emphasize or portray thought or emotion. An easy posture gives elegance and grace to speakers. Gestures, after having been artificially acquired will become a natural expression if properly employed. Gesture, like the voice, ought to be studied under a master and although few gestures are necessary, if made awkwardly, they will detract from the art of the speaker.

There are some who may say that the problem of scientific speech is not for them to work on. They never expect to speak in public. Why take the trouble to train? An extract from a letter from the Adjutant General's office, Washington, August 28, 1917, will give just one circumstance of those men who perhaps never intended to speak in public but had they been qualified to do so would have been useful to their country and a credit to themselves.

"A great number of men have failed at camp because of inability to articulate clearly. Many men disqualified by this handicap might have become officers under their country's flag had they been properly trained in school and college."

This emergency arose and some were unable to meet it; there may be others of another character in the course of a lifetime. Will experience teach?

Much can be done privately to improve our mode of speech, and in the removal of universal carelessness in conversation, in the matter of enunciation and pronunciation. Let us hope, however, that in the very near future vocal culture will be given its rightful place in the school. Millions of dollars are spent for coaches and equipment that boys may do scientific battle on the athletic field but not one cent for the preparation of an important weapon in the battle of life. It would be safe to say that not more than twenty percent of our college graduates can read aloud intelligently to an audience.

At the beginning of Fall, we see the football squads sent out upon the field to prepare for the season. The coach sends them

through all kinds of seemingly ridiculous exercises such as running, walking in a crouched position and calisthenics, all of which contribute to the perfection of a player. The training of the speaking voice calls for similar attention in exercising the organs of speech by drills in vocalizing the vowels and consonants, placing the voice so that it will resound against the frontal bones of the face, and exercising the lips to relieve rigidity.

With the proper attention and the advice of a master, a pleasing voice can be and should be the possession of every intelligent person. The development of this gift is within his power and every available opportunity should be sought in its acquisition. If speech is one of the greatest of God's gifts, then we can return no better thanks than making an effort to make use of that gift to every possible advantage.

“Unto His Own”

The Son of God has come to earth
Amidst the wintry snows;
The Lord of lords, the King of kings
Is wrapt in swaddling clothes!

O pilgrim-heart of man rejoice,
And bless this Holy Night:
For there is come unto your path
The Life the Way the Light!