

## PERE DIDON AT ARCUEIL

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To one who has read the lives of Lacordaire and Didon there appears at once a striking similarity between these two men. Both were French Dominicans of the last century; both were characters of unusual strength and magnetic personality. On each of them God had showered His choicest intellectual gifts, and rarest powers of oratory. Each was a child of his times, in close touch with the hearts of his fellow men, and an ardent lover of his native land. They were, too, constructive men of apostolic hearts, seeing far ahead of the immediate needs of the day, and working first of all for the lasting future welfare of the Church and of France; of Didon no less than of Lacordaire could it be said that he was, in this respect, "a citizen of the future." It is more than a mere coincidence, then, that after Lacordaire had passed away there should be called to govern the community he had founded, and to continue the work he had begun, a man who loved to refer to his great predecessor as "my Master," and who was so deeply imbued with that master's spirit.

A happy inspiration it was, indeed, that urged the community of Arcueil, in March, 1890, to elect Didon as their Prior, and as director of the school of Albert the Great. Few men could have been better fitted to cope with existing abuses. At that time the schools of France were drifting farther and farther from the ideal of education. They were too little in harmony with the spirit of the age to keep their hand on the religious, social, and political pulse of France. The primary schools, especially, had allowed their schedules to degenerate, for the most part, into a monotonous round of classics and abstract sciences, with the result that they imparted a great deal of knowledge, perhaps, but little or no character. The educators of the day seemed to think man a creature of pure intellect and no heart, so assiduously did they cultivate the one to the exclusion of the other. As for physical culture, that was utterly ignored. Small wonder, then, that leading such a life for ten dragging years, the boy in the primary schools felt crushed under the long, monotonous hours of study, broken only by the short and equally monotonous hours of recreation, and became under this dispiriting system a mere passive machine, void of all personal initiative and healthy ambition.

To remedy this sad state of affairs was the task that confronted Didon when he took up the reins of government at Arcueil. His superiors placed in him the highest confidence. Shortly after his installation as Prior, he received from his former Provincial, Père Chocarne, a letter of congratulation, reading in part as follows: "When I compare the middle of this century with its end, the youth of yesterday with the youth of today, our past glorious struggles for educational, political, and social liberty with the present apathy and hopeless chaos, I console myself that you have been called to build up for us on these ruins a youth of solid Christian character to take part in the public life of the future. . . . Happily, indeed, you are here." The ten years of Didon's career at Arcueil were to show how well founded were these high hopes placed in him.

One of his first acts, after accepting the office of Prior, was to put himself into touch with the parents of the boys entrusted to his care. To this end he addressed to them the following circular letter:

"Arcueil, March 30, 1890.

"I feel it my duty to inform you that the Most Reverend Father Larroca, Master General of the Order of St. Dominic, in accordance with the unanimous vote of the religious at Arcueil, has entrusted to me as Prior the direction of the school of Albert the Great. In presenting myself to you, I take pleasure in hoping that you will extend to me the same generous confidence that you have accorded to my esteemed predecessors. Such a confidence will be to me, after God, the greatest help in the accomplishment of a work which concerns you above all, and of which I realize the difficulties and the religious importance."

This letter found a warm response in the hearts of those who received it, and opened the way for the intimate relationship between parent and teacher that was henceforth to characterize the school of Albert the Great.

For the first few months in his new office, Didon contented himself, for the most part, with studying at close range the needs of the school in his charge. His keen mind readily discerned the faults of the existing methods, and suggested to him at once the most effective remedies. Before the end of the first term he had begun in earnest his broad policy of reconstruction—a policy that immediately provoked from his critics shouts of "Innovation!"

which were soon silenced for all time by his unparalleled success.

His first concern was for the immediate betterment of the physical comfort of his boys. Nothing pained him more than to see them fenced in a small campus, with scant room for the games and contests that make so much for physical, mental, and moral health. Obtaining permission to apply to the improvement of the campus at Arcueil a portion of the large profits accruing from his "Life of Christ," he purchased an adjoining farm and converted it into a riding track for the students. Not content with this, during the following year he added Parc Laplace. The joy of the students knew no bounds. On the feast of St. Thomas, a part of the walls surrounding the old Chateau Laplace was battered down, and the enthusiastic boys, pouring through the breach, took solemn possession of their new playground. Having obtained a suitable campus for his charges, Didon threw himself heart and soul into the promotion of athletics at Arcueil. He formed teams, arranged field days and track meets, and organized the Athletic Association of Albert the Great.

In introducing athletics, he met with considerable opposition, especially from the more nervous among the mothers of the boys. "Father," said one of them, on bringing her son to Arcueil, "my boy must not participate in athletics, above all, not in that horrid game of football." "Madame," answered he, "he shall not take part in the games contrary to your wishes; but you are doing the boy a cruel wrong. There is little danger of his getting hurt, and besides," he added, with a twinkle in his eyes, "don't you know that a broken arm, after it has knit, is stronger than a new one?" In the end his ardent pleading on the boy's part generally triumphed over the mother's fears.

The great importance Didon attached to athletics in his scheme of education must not lead us to think that he ever made them, or suffered others to make them, an end in themselves. Nothing was farther from his purpose. But knowing well the heart and nature of boys, he realized the value of athletics as a means whereby to promote mental and moral education; and as such he used them. In his discourse on "The Influence of Athletics," he enumerates the principal reasons he had for adopting his policy. Among them the chief are these: Athletics are especially helpful in inculcating in the youth a spirit of hardiness and perseverance, and making him ready and eager to combat the dif-

ficulties of life. They make for contentment with the somewhat trying life of a boarding-school. They promote teamwork, develop personal initiative, and inspire a love of honesty and fair play. Indulged in with moderation, they sharpen the mind, making it all the more fit for earnest study. Finally, and perhaps most important of all, they keep the boys healthily occupied during free hours, and promote a spirit of good fellowship, thus leaving little time or inclination for them to form into those small, exclusive cliques of "particular" friends that are the bane of boarding-school life.

In other forms of recreation, as in athletics, Didon sought to mingle education with pleasure. Especially noticeable is this in the disposition he made of the Easter and summer vacations, when he would frequently organize a tour of the students to some place of general interest and of educational value. The idea of these vacation trips was not original with Didon, as they had been inaugurated at Arcueil several years previously by Père Barral; but whereas at first they had been confined to the Alps and neighboring places in France, Didon introduced an element of novelty and greater interest by making them more varied and more extended. On many of these trips he accompanied the boys in person; when he did not go, one of the other Fathers captained the party. Among the most noteworthy of these tours, were one to Constantinople and the near East in 1894, one to Athens for the Olympic games of 1896, one to Palestine in 1898, and two to Rome, in 1891 and 1893. On both of these latter occasions the pilgrims were most graciously admitted to a private audience by Pope Leo XIII; and as Didon, remembering his own first view of the Father of Christendom, had expected, they came home with hearts renewed and strengthened in loyalty to the Holy See.

Far above athletics and pleasure trips during the holidays, however, Didon regarded the development and education of the intellect. In this very feature he had found the curriculum at Arcueil particularly faulty and impractical. As in most of the primary schools of France, excessive emphasis was placed on the study of the classics. Without unduly shunting this important means of culture, Didon brought into greater prominence the study of history, modern languages, and practical sciences. More important still for the mental development of the students, by his happy knack of endowing everything at the school with a mar-



vellous attractiveness, he succeeded in inspiring at Arcueil an enthusiastic spirit of study. The boys adored him, trusted him implicitly, and were happy. And happy hearts make splendid students. Here a wise word of encouragement, there a correction, gentle but firm, put new vigor and purpose into the mental life of the boys. They no longer studied for the classroom only, but had imbibed from the words of their Father a deep-seated ambition to make some real use of their lives. They quickly perceived that their new master intended not to drive them but to lead them; and this once seen, they set out to follow, as boys always will, with flying feet.

Another act by which Didon contributed, indirectly at least, to the intellectual life at Arcueil was the establishment at Paris of the boarding school of Lacordaire and the day school of St. Dominic, as the long-needed complements of the school of Albert the Great. Hitherto, graduates from Arcueil were not eligible for entrance into the more advanced of the vocational schools of France without passing through an intermediate course at one or other of the various public lyceums. Knowing from common experience that in these schools the young students far too often drifted into fatal agnostic and atheistic state of mind, Didon wished to keep them, throughout the formative period of their lives, under the salutary influence of Christian teachers. This the opening of the two new schools accomplished. In them the young men were given preparatory courses in law, medicine, engineering, naval and military tactics, etc., of such efficiency that, upon graduating, they were well fitted for entrance into the foremost academies of France. For similar reasons advanced courses in commerce and agriculture were opened at Chateau Laplace, adjoining Albert the Great at Arcueil.

The underlying motive for the foundation of these schools evinces to us the deep concern of Père Didon for the moral and religious education of the youth entrusted to his care. This was, in fact, his primary purpose; everything he did, he adapted to the formation and moulding of character. If he encouraged athletics, it was even more to strengthen the will than the body; if he incited in the boys a love of knowledge, it was first of all a knowledge that would fortify them against the insidious atheism rampant in the world they were to face. Courage, honesty, patriotism—he inculcated all, not as mere natural virtues, but ennobled and raised to the supernatural plane. His whole theory

of education might be epitomized thus: "Everything else must be subservient to the formation of character, and the character must be subjected to the Church and to Christ." Here is the ideal Didon held up to his boys—Christ, the beau Ideal of youth. This was the Ideal that had guided and sustained him in his storm-swept life, the Ideal that was to him the very pulse of his heart; and, loving It above all things, and faithful to It always, he sought every occasion to lead others to share that love and fidelity. On this subject he exhausted his matchless powers of oratory. In weekly conferences at stated seasons of the year, he addressed the boys at Arcueil and the young men at the Paris schools on the importance and necessity of training the will, of holding fast and perfecting their faith, of fidelity to the voice of conscience, of love and loyalty to Holy Church, and of conforming their lives to the life of the Gospel Christ. Yet even here he was too wise to drive. What he could not get the boys to do with willing heart and of their own initiative, he would leave undone. What he wanted to form—and what he did form—was a deep, abiding love of their religion in the hearts of the students, a love on which he could rely to keep them faithful when, all restraint removed, they would step out of the school as free men into a free world. Thus did he form in his charges true manliness of character, and realize the high hopes placed in him for the rearing of the Christian youth of the future.

Such was the work of Père Didon at Arcueil. To us of America it seems, perhaps, not startlingly original, for it has many points in common with the system of education that, happily, has long obtained among us; but to his contemporaries in France it was a departure from existing methods so radical that nothing short of unqualified success could justify it. That such a meed of success attended it can be readily shown by a few eloquent figures. On accepting the Priorship of Arcueil in 1890 Didon found himself master of two hundred pupils; at the end of his term he had under his direction nearly seven hundred. In place of one school, he left four. And whereas in 1890 no pupil could pass directly from the Fathers' care into the more advanced academies, they were, under Didon's régime, equipped for entrance into the foremost schools of France. More than once, indeed, did a graduate of the school of Lacordaire or of St. Dominic carry off first honors in the examinations at the Polytechnic School and the Naval Academy. During his last years in office,

Didon could look about him and see former pupils of his among the prominent barristers and doctors, successful engineers, and brilliant commanders of the legions of France; and whatever their profession in life, he was comforted in knowing that they brought to bear upon it the solid character and Christian manliness which, on their own admission, they owed in great part to their beloved Master at Arcueil.

For ten years had Didon labored unceasingly for the education of the youth of France, when, called suddenly by death on January 13, 1900, he was forced to lay down the reins of government. What he might have accomplished had he lived longer, we can but conjecture. But, after all, it seems that the mercy of Providence removed him in the height of his glory, to spare him the sorrows that, three years later, would have been his when the iniquitous "Law of Associations" destroyed with one fell stroke the unremitting labor of ten long years.

—Bro. Louis Clark, O. P.