

THE ADULT EDUCATION MOVEMENT

ALFRED O'RAHILLY

I HAVE been interested in University Extension since 1915. But it was only a little over four years ago that circumstances combined to make a new scheme possible. Its success has been so astonishing—and the movement is destined to grow apace—that a brief explanation may be of general interest. It is hardly necessary to stress the importance of adult education for workers—and indeed for employers. It is absurd to suppose that men and women can be adequately equipped for life and for their social responsibilities while they are attending a primary school or are still in their teens. It is equally absurd to suppose that education ceases when the boy or girl finally leaves school; the most influential part of education or miseducation continues through press, radio, cinema, and social intercourse. In our arithmetical democracy the real power lies ultimately not with the highly educated but with the mass of men and women with the minimum of formal education. I am not referring to technical training such as tradesmen receive; I mean education of human persons as such, particularly as regards social principles and current ideologics. Even for Catholics the Sunday sermon is not enough, nor even does the sodality suffice. What is required is a further education which will enter fully into men's daily secular lives and deal with their responsibilities as citizens, as workers, as trade unionists. I think that we have now made a real beginning in Ireland. There are already over three hundred adult students, in ten centres, attached to University College, Cork; and next year, if we could cope with them, these numbers could be doubled. (Similar activities have been initiated by the University Colleges of Dublin and Galway.) I will briefly describe the principles which we have found successful.

We have for years been trying occasional lectures and short isolated courses; but we saw that we were getting nowhere. Modern social and economic problems can be grasped only through continuous teaching, combined with home-work, reading, essays, discussions, and personal contact. This is all the more necessary for adults who have left school years before and

are not accustomed to study. There is a world of difference between a number of public lectures and a regularly meeting class based on a definite syllabus which is systematically taught. All our courses are therefore spread over two years and involve the passing of two examinations.

Each student is provided with a small set of books and pamphlets; further reading matter is to be found in local libraries. The lecturers are mostly those already engaged in the local school for vocational education; teachers of a particular subject come to the College for periodical conferences to discuss the syllabus and to exchange ideas. The lecturers in Sociology (our most important subject) are local priests nominated by the respective bishops. Visits and lectures from the College staff and others are arranged to provide stimulus and variety. We have film-strips and we propose to make some films. Arrangements are being made to print lecture-notes, and we hope ultimately to produce our own text-books.

We train our students in speaking, in debate, in conducting meetings. Writing is one of their biggest difficulties, so we practise them in short essays.

The above sounds very formidable as a task placed before men and women long out of school and unaccustomed to study. The difficulty will appear to be enormously increased by the fact that they have at the same time to earn their living as clerks, tradesmen, manual workers, trade union officials, and so on. Lectures have to be crowded into two or three nights a week, with—in some centres—a half-day which the employers grant without loss of pay. But there is no use in urging theoretical objections against the simple fact that four classes have successfully won their diplomas after their two years' course, and that others are clamouring for new classes.

In many ways it is a great advantage that the students are not dissociated from their avocations; there is no tendency to train them for white-collar jobs or professions; they are meant to be a leaven among their own people. Nor are the pedagogical disadvantages as great as one might think. We have chosen our subjects so that they have immediate relevance to the lives of our students. They all have to do Sociology and Economics, taught as realistically and as concretely as possible. As potential leaders they must all learn to write, to speak and to debate. Workers also learn

about trade unionism, social legislation, simple office work, and so on. Farmers and farm labourers in our three rural centres learn farm costings, rural science, metal- and wood-work. Thus, by appealing to practical life, we can help our students to overcome any defects in formal education. In fact, these adult students are more receptive and intelligent than most undergraduates.

In any case, it would not be financially possible to bring these students for two years to a university centre. The majority are married men with families; their total weekly earnings are about £1,500.

It must be emphasised that we are not engaged in mass education; none of our classes is allowed to exceed thirty-five. Our courses involve hard work, almost a measure of heroism, certainly zeal above the ordinary level and beyond the reach of crowds. Besides, it is important to establish close personal contact not only with the teachers but among the members of the class; we want to foster the idea of being engaged in a common apostolic enterprise. Our object is to train leaders. It is not our function to run trade-unions or to undertake rural co-operation; we are equipping our students to do this. Here we have taken a leaf out of the Communists' book.

A generation ago this movement would not, I think, have met with such a response. But today there is an active minority anxious for help and guidance and willing to make sacrifices. We do not hold out any worldly advantages for the individual, we do not undertake professional or technical training. Hence there is already an element of idealism, a desire to fulfil one's social obligations and to help one's fellows. Ultimately this inspiration is religious. (We are quite willing to accept Protestants; but in fact, apart from our classes for business executives, all our adult students are Catholics). There are many lay-people anxious to *do* something for Christ; a number of our students are already members of the Legion of Mary. They are eager to equip themselves not only to combat alien ideologies but to understand how to apply Catholic social principles in daily life. Thus, while we do not preach sermons, this religious motivation is appreciated.

We lay particular stress on a sense of fellowship—what the early Christians called *koinonia*. Hence in each centre teachers and pupils have a weekly tea together—a modest revival of the Christian *agape*! The class-members start with the unexpected idea that

we are interested in them as persons, not as 'hands', that we look upon them as brothers and sisters. And gradually they acquire a great sense of comradeship, a conviction that they have a mission. This culminates in a full ceremony of conferring when the students, in the presence of their comrades and their wives and children as well as of University staff and civic dignitaries, come up one by one to receive their hard-earned Diplomas.

To the theorist all these psychological adjuncts may seem trifles. I am convinced that without them we should have failed to awaken enthusiasm and self-sacrifice. It is a heartening experience to meet a class of workers studying for the Diploma in Social and Economic Science, or a class of young farmers working for the Diploma in Social and Rural Science. It is only in church that men are fully equal and all artificial distinctions disappear, when we kneel together to receive Christ's Body and Blood. Usage has perhaps made this Christian fellowship stale to many of us. But in one of our classes our students feel once more that they are persons, that they have a value and a vocation. It is this spirit which underlies our success.

We have started a new course, for a Diploma in Sociology, adapted to small towns, where people feel isolated and powerless and lack intellectual stimulus. This already shows great promise, and we have received numerous requests for further centres. There has never been a class like this in Ireland before. County Councillors, Urban District Councillors, men and women, employers and trade unionists, graduates; a teacher, a railway porter, a father with his son—they have come back to sit and study together at school! Women in the country have asked for special classes. There is no limit to the possibilities of this new type of education. If it is allowed to extend for a few more years, we shall have trained Catholic lay leaders scattered throughout the country.

Last summer I met a deputation of French Catholic intellectuals. I admitted to them that Ireland had no lay thinkers and writers comparable to Maritain, Gilson and Claudel. But, I said, we had a unique treasure which no other country had: workers who, almost to the extent of 100 per cent, believed in and practised their religion. This is true; but how long will it remain true? Now is the time to train our people, to form a lay apostolate, to prepare our defences against Communist infiltration.