

TOWARDS PERFECT EDUCATION

The pertinent remarks of Penguin on "Modern Education" in the September number of BLACKFRIARS invite the expression of the principles of perfect education set forth in the following pages.¹

There is a marked similarity between the ideal put by St. Angela Merici before her children in the sixteenth century and that set by St. Dominic before his, more than three centuries before. "Angela's was a war for truth," writes one of her most recent and authorised biographers. Truth was also the ruling principle, one might almost say passion, of St. Dominic. Both were no doubt inspired by their common father, St. Augustine, whose rule of life was chosen by them both. "What desire," he asks, "is more deeply rooted in our soul than the desire for truth?" It was so deeply rooted in the soul of St. Angela that on her tomb in Brescia it is written that she was not only an Apostle in word, but a Martyr in desire. Her desire was to give her life, as Christ gave His, in testimony to Truth, in a spirit of self-sacrificing service of the Truth, under the patronage of St. Ursula and the great multitude of virgins with her who were themselves martyrs to the cause of Truth.

The Apostolate of Truth may be resumed, it would not be exaggerated to suggest, in the word "Education." "Education," as Newman puts it, "is a high word. It is the preparation for knowledge and it is the imparting of knowledge in proportion to that preparation." In particular it is the preparation for that knowledge which Our Lord has called Eternal Life. "This is eternal life that they may know Thee, the only true God and Jesus Christ." To prepare men for this knowledge, which is in its perfection the Beatific Vision, is the essential work of the Church of God. It is sometimes called the salvation of souls. If, then, by

¹ The substance of this article was originally addressed to Ursuline Nuns, daughters of St. Angela Merici.

education is meant the informing of souls by the holiness of truth, it appears to be a work in the highest sense divine. It consists, to quote Pope Pius XI, "in preparing man . . . to attain the sublime end for which he was created." This involves, of course, preparing men to fulfil rightly the duties of their state of life here on earth. Under the generic term education must be included technical education, university education, spiritual direction, and so on, as well as the education of children, from the time they come to the use of reason until they pass, in Jørgenson's phrase, "out of school and into life." With this last department of education we are here particularly concerned. And as the writer has had no practical experience of it as a teacher, he must confine himself to principles. He is the more encouraged in this venture because of his conviction that practice should always be related to, and proceed from, principle; and also because he has read of St. Angela that "to her mind it was of first importance that the teachers of girls proceed upon definite, assured principles." He ventures, therefore, to propose twelve principles of education. The first four are founded on metaphysics and should win the assent of mere common sense. The others are based on faith and on theology. They are concerned with Catholic education.

It may be laid down as a first principle that education should be for the good of the child. The primary intention, therefore, should never be either the good of the teacher or the good of the school. The teacher is for the school, and the school is for the child. Everything that the teacher does, therefore, must be (as teachers so often say!) for the child's own good.

The second principle is that the ultimate good to which each thing aspires is its own perfection. There is a natural desire in everything *to be perfectly* what it is as yet imperfectly. The good of the child therefore, at which its teacher should aim is the child's perfection.

The third principle is that the perfection of each thing is according to the nature of the child. It is necessary for a teacher, therefore, to have an intimate knowledge of child

psychology. But in this matter there are two primary considerations for all teachers. The first is that the child is human. From this it follows that the child is not an angel. Its nature is essentially composite and complex. It has various, and sometimes conflicting, energies and tendencies. But its distinguishing characteristic, insofar as it is human, is that it is rational. All a child's powers therefore must be so developed as to be subordinate to reason.² If there be found, and there will be found, in what is called the lower nature of a child, tendencies which are not according to reason, these must be mortified and made subordinate. To this end, that a child's lower nature may be completely subject to the ruling of its higher nature, or reason, the educator must direct his efforts. Nevertheless subordination is not to be confounded with suppression. A child's bodily well-being has to be considered as well as the good of his soul. But care for the body must never be allowed to interfere with the good of the soul. And sometimes the body may need to be chastised, as in extreme cases its very life must be sacrificed, for the good of the soul. The second consideration is that each child has its own individual nature controlled by its own personality. The true educator must help each child to be itself, to use its own personal talents to the best advantage and to actualise its peculiar aptitudes or capabilities. It follows that a child should be so educated that it may become all that it ought to be; in other words, as perfect as it can be. The teacher's aim must be to help each child to make the most of itself. It is indeed the greatest compliment one can pay to anyone to say, as it is sometimes said not without a touch of condescension, that he has made the most of himself. No one could possibly do more!

The fourth principle is that the perfection of human life—the end to which it tends—is knowledge. This follows from the concept of human nature as rational. Its most deep-seated desire, as Augustine has already said, is to know.

² Professor John Macmurray, University College, London, takes a different view. "Emotional life," he writes, "is the core and essence of human life; the intellect is subordinate."

The happiness which all men desire consists ultimately in knowing Truth. "L'esser beato," wrote Dante, comes not by love "which after followeth" but by knowledge of the Truth "wherein rest is for every mind." According to this principle, to *be* perfectly is to *know* perfectly. This is life indeed—to know the Truth.

The fifth principle is a first principle of Christianity. It is that all children who have been baptised, "have put on Christ." They are not merely human, and their destiny is not the destiny of mere human nature. They are born not of human parents only but, by a second birth, of God. They come to our schools, then, not as the children of this or that human family merely (however distinguished be its name) but as the children of God. "Whosoever receiveth such a child as this in My Name," said Our Lord, "receiveth Me." In this story, says Cardinal Wiseman, we have the whole theory of Catholic education.

The sixth principle is that the perfection of God's children is to be like His "best beloved Son." They are predestined to be made conformable to the image of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. This conformity must be effected especially in mind and will. That a child may have the mind of Christ must be the teacher's primary aim. On this St. Angela insisted. "Her teaching idea," we read, "was that all knowledge must be summed up in the knowledge of Christ." It is to be expected that this knowledge will turn into love. Indeed the very condition of the perfect knowledge of Christ is love.

The seventh principle is hardly more than a corollary of the sixth. It is that whatever is taught in our schools must be taught in reference to Divine Truth. This Truth is indeed the source and principle of all truth. It is God's own conception of all reality. Whatever is true, whether in nature, science, literature or art, must correspond to this conception. Divine Truth is, therefore, the regulating principle of Catholic education, and the Catholic teacher should never lose sight of it. This will imply in the teacher, according to the view of St. Thomas, a contemplative life. *Con-*

templatio divinatorum est in visione principii,³ he writes: "The contemplation of divine things is in the vision of the Principle." And elsewhere "*Visio docentis est principium doctrinae*"⁴: "the vision of the teacher is the principle of his teaching." This leads directly to the conclusion which St. Thomas himself goes on to formulate *Vita contemplativa est principium doctrinae*⁵; the contemplative life is the source or principle of what is taught. The teacher, then, may be compared to the child's angel guardian in this that to direct the child aright he must always look upon the face of the child's Father who is in heaven.

A practical corollary follows from this principle. If the person charged with education has not God in mind, if especially he does not keep before himself God's ideal or conception of each particular child whom God has committed to him for formation, the child cannot possibly be educated according to its heavenly Father's mind. St. Angela so far insists on this as to require that the teacher be a living exponent of the teaching. And St. Dominic also expects his children *to be* the Truth they teach. This, again, is found in St. Augustine: *Utinam tu Christum sic induaris, ut discipulos tuos magis ipsius velis discipulos esse quam tuos*.⁶ "Would that you so put on Christ that your effective will may be that your disciples be rather His than yours."

The eighth principle is that every subject in the school's curriculum must be subjected to the one object of God's mind which is the Word of Truth. By the Word all things were made, and by its image existing in this Word each thing is directed to its end. "We understand," writes St. Paul, "that the world was framed by the Word of God; that from invisible things visible things might be made." Everything in nature, therefore, has its message of truth for the mind. The heavens, says the Psalmist, declare the

(3) II, IIae 45, 3 *ad* 3.

(4) *De Ver.* II 4 *ad* 3.

(5) *Loc. cit.* *ad* 4.

(6) *Contra Maximinum*, III, C. 24. 14.

glory of God. To Francis Thompson the very grass was garrulous of God. There are tongues in trees, as Shakespeare puts it, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones. "To me," writes Wordsworth, "the meanest flower that blows" can give deepest thoughts. Everything in nature holds in its heart some thought that craves to be liberated and made articulate in the human mind and in human speech. God's Word of Truth, re-echoed or reflected in all creation, must order and should be re-echoed in every human word. It follows that whatever is taught, whether natural history, or science, or art, or languages, or philosophy, must be taught in view of that timeless Truth, in whose perpetual light alone we can find that rest which is our heart's desire. G. K. Chesterton summed up this principle in the words: "The whole point of education is that it should give a man abstract and eternal standards by which he can judge material and fugitive conditions."

The ninth principle is that true education means the formation of character. This follows from what has been said. To love Truth, to seek it always, and always to stand by Principle, means character. The aims of the educator, therefore, must be so to train the child that it will react almost instinctively, by that second nature called virtue, in favour of what is true and right, and therefore good. Its will must be captivated, as far as may be in this mortal life where we live by faith and not yet by sight, by the beauty of Truth, and its whole affective nature detached from, and made irresponsive to, all counter-attractions. This strength to do always what is right, this rooted disposition to stand always by the Word of God no matter what the cost, this determination to resist any attraction that is not according to God, is character. Only character ensures the keeping of God's commandments, and the doing of His Will which is our sanctification. To the formation of the child's character, therefore, all a teacher's efforts must be bent.

The tenth principle is that only one who lives in the spirit of Christ—the spirit of a child—will always "relish whatever is right" in the sense explained. This spirit is love.

Truth to carry full conviction must be loved. Love is the very life of Truth. It follows that true education must be education into love. This love is only found, we know by faith, in and through its Sacrament; and its necessary and spontaneous expression of self-sacrifice. To live by the sacrifice of Christ is the highest lesson the Christian educator has to teach. It is only taught by those who live His life of sacrifice; who live as St. Dominic and St. Angela would have their children live, in the spirit of His Martyrdom.

The eleventh principle will seem to many a hard word. But it follows necessarily. It is that the Christian educator must prepare each child for the altar of sacrifice. Each must be, like God's best loved Child, a victim of that Love. Divine Love demands victimhood. But while Love makes that general demand of all—it is indeed "a lord with terrible aspect"—it makes particular demands of each. Education should ensure that these demands be met. All must learn to love God with their whole heart and soul, with all their mind and with all their strength, and their neighbours as themselves, that is to say, as children of God and therefore as Christ Himself. But the manifestation of this spirit of love (which means essentially to be well-disposed towards everyone, following the example of Christ) will be made differently by each according to each one's special calling. God's love calls one to this state of life and another to that. All have not the same place to occupy in the Mystical Body of Christ, nor the same work to do. The business of the educator is to help the child to follow, and walk worthily of, the vocation in which it is called. It is the function of Christian education to fit each member for the place which it is called to occupy in the Mystical Body of Christ, that "doing the truth in charity, it may grow up in Him Who is the Head, even Christ."

Finally to know what each child is called to be, the educator must look, says Blessed John Dominici, O.P., to a five-fold consideration; God; its parents; itself; the State (*Respublica*); its fortunes (including its talents, its social position and environment). In one word, God's Will for

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each one is best known according to the exigencies and possibilities of the whole situation in which each one's life is cast. The choice of a vocation rests ultimately, of course, with the child itself, but to be rightly made it should be made in the light of all the circumstances—of the child's own capacities and of the possibilities, morally speaking, of actuating these capacities to the best advantage in view of eternal life.

The child who is educated on these principles should arrive, by the grace of God, at being all that it ought to be, and that can be summed up in the one word, True. The child or the man who is in the fullest sense true to God, to his own self, to his family, his country, and his fellow-man, has learned all that he needs to learn. He is the product of a perfect education.

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