

Rome Rule Okay?

John McKay

'By virtue of its very purpose, while it cultivates the intellect with unremitting attention, the school ripens the capacity for right judgment, provides an introduction into the cultural heritage won by past generations, promotes a sense of values, and readies for professional life'.

THE DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN 11

Just before nine o'clock I dragged my tired frame in through the school doors and on towards the staff room.

'Good morning' . . . 'Good morning'

Like that frustrated character Billy Liar I would like to machine-gun down that irritating cheerful face in the corner. I pour out my tea and sip it quietly, consulting my timetable. On the wall across the road a painted slogan reinforces the image of my first class, 4F.

BING BOOT BOYS ROOL

At the first piercing sound of the bell Mr. C. rises sharply and makes off in the direction of the Technical rooms. I would like to bomb that bell for ever but instead make my way wearily upstairs to room 5, open the door, and walk over to the desk. I am soon followed by a few lads who make towards the desks at the window.

'D'ye catch that cunt last night, Joey'?

'Aye an' a kicked fuck oot the bastirt'.

'Whit di dae'?

'Try i get aff wi Mary Maloney'.

'Yi bin gawn wi hur, eh'?

'Aye a fancy hur—yi shid see 'ur tits, sur. A hivnae hud it aff fur ages—an a fancy mu chances wi yon burd'.

I pick up a book, *Your Life of Our Lord*, and try to think of 2c's R.K. lesson while a few more boys come trickling in the door. I acknowledge them with a casual look and they join their mates. I have given up struggling with these lads. They resist all efforts to get them to read or to write. They have immunised themselves against learning and against teachers. Yesterday a boy in 3H wrote this sentence for me:

The tubes go to Strathclyde college

The word 'tubes' is really untranslatable but means something like 'effete types' or 'respectable guys'

Another boy comes in and the conversation continues . . .

'Did yi see the carey oan et the discae'?

'Aye big Jim an Tommy wi the Brig boys . . .'

'The polis came along'.

'Aye, an Big Jim knocked a fuckin windae in'.

I decided to make an effort, a gesture. 'What would you like to do to-day, boys'?

'Nuthin'.

'Jist talk'.

'Take us fur a run, sur'.

'Aye takes us oot in yur motur, sur'.

I put them off this line of thinking with difficulty (there are too many of them this morning) and, besides, they are fairly settled and haven't resorted to arguing or fighting as yet.

One of the 'boys' in front of me, Joey Wilson, is the father of a three-month-old baby girl. Joey is just sixteen.

At the Dining Hall table I grow sick as I listen to Sister T and others :

'I see that Joseph Wilson is getting into school alright, despite the bus strike'.

'Yes, his father is the leading light at the bus station'.

'Yes, he's the one who's holding them out, yet do you know he's running children in from Homelea in his own car, and charging them fares'.

'And did you know that they threatened to overturn a mini-bus the other day'.

I began to protest as mildly as I could :

'I find it difficult to believe that the chief shop steward would dare to charge people fares in his car'.

My challenge is met with silence. The Franciscan sister and the others are amazed that a teacher has the nerve to defend the father of such a hooligan as Joseph Wilson; and the father's militant stand on the bus strike is just another aspect of hooliganism, is it not? Like father, like son. In the midst of my sickness I began to see a ray of hope for Joseph Wilson. Maybe he won't end up in Barlinnie. Maybe he'll become a fighting shop steward like his father. He may, eventually, leave the 'tubes' behind.

I asked Joey later about his father. He said his father only took himself and his family to school and that his father is threatening to stop the mini-bus run by *the teachers*. Was this the reason for the teacher's resentment and doubtful tale?

After school hours an R.K. meeting was held to discuss the existing syllabus. Mr Bain, in the chair, says that the meeting has been called because some have felt dissatisfaction at the course set out by Father McG. It seems too vague. What do the others think?

'I think we should get down to the basics again. A lot of them don't go to mass. We should concentrate on the mass'.

I knew that the mass could be important as the focus of the Christian community, a free association of committed believers, and I protested that the Catholic school could not provide the proper atmosphere for this because of the compulsory nature of schooling, the use of the belt and other threats. The reaction to this was silence. Fundamental problems are never tackled. Some never think of these issues at all; some

think that these problems will always be with us—like the ‘hooligans’; and some seem to think that these problems are not *their* problems.

The meeting continued.

‘An awful lot of them don’t know their prayers, either. We must get them to say their prayers and get them to learn them off by heart’.

I was trying to think of how learning prayers off by heart bore any relevance to the spiritual needs of these children whose every day obsessions and fantasies (at least amongst the boys) seemed to be variations of sex and violence. And I was much the same at their age. But how break that unhealthy continuity that goes on to produce the corrupt adult world of alienated work and escape, where the Church is simply an optional activity or an insurance policy from middle age onwards.

For these teachers faith was ritual. Prayers, the mass, benediction, were the fruits by which you would know them. I then took a different line of argument in order to try to save Father McG’s programme which in the initial stages introduced the children to the origins of the Christian faith in a historical and scientific perspective. I argued that these prayers ought to be known by now as the children had about seven years in the primary to learn them.

‘Ah, but they must keep learning them because they forget—as they forget how to do their arithmetic or history’.

I felt sick again. Learning by heart, in effect, meant learning with the head. Prayer ought to come *from* the heart and our father in heaven knows all our needs. Get the heart right, and the head will follow after with the appropriate words when necessary.

‘We must give them the Penny Catechism, again. They don’t even know their Ten Commandments anymore’.

I tried to point out that the commandments of Jesus were to love one another in all circumstances, and that there are not just ten commandments but a thousand times ten.

At the next meeting a list of prayers was drawn up from the back of the Catechism, and it was decided that these prayers should be taught to the children as a priority while Father McG’s syllabus was put into suspension. Prayers such as the ‘Memorare’ were given unanimous approval but the ‘Magnificat’ was ignored. And as I drove home that evening I tried to imagine Joey Wilson reverently saying ‘Virgin of Virgins most pure’ but all I could hear was :

‘A hivnae hud it aff fur ages—an a fancy mu chances wi yon burd’.