

CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION IN AMERICA

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TO understand the position, the accomplishments and the problems of Catholic higher education in the United States, one must first understand the circumstances under which it was set up. The Catholic immigrants coming to the country found there an educational system already established, and established with an atmosphere that was anything but Catholic. American school law was strict in that it required every child to go to school, and American public opinion was becoming constantly more interested in extending the period in which he should remain in school. But along with this legal and social insistence on schooling there went a universal recognition that a parent could choose the school that his child would attend. He was perfectly free, if he so wished and could afford it, to send the child to a private school. There was neither a state monopoly of education as found in France, nor state aid to private schools as has been the case in England.

The American hierarchy had a choice to make. Would they allow Catholic children to be educated in the state schools and run the risk of loss of faith, or would they construct a Catholic school system and raise the money for it themselves? They chose the latter course, and by herculean effort and great sacrifice they built an educational structure whose aim was to duplicate the public-school system, grade for grade, subject for subject, advantage for advantage. This work would have been impossible without the teaching Orders, especially the Orders of teaching sisters. It would also have been impossible without the contribution of the laymen who all along, of course, were paying their share of the support of the state schools as well. But because all these people did their work well the aim of providing a Catholic educational system has been attained.

At the head of our public educational system stand the colleges and universities, institutions that give the bachelor's degree and the advanced degrees. As our Catholic population rose more and more from its proletarian status to a point where it began to desire a

liberal or professional education for some of its youth, the need of extending our school system to include schools of higher or professional learning became pressing. Here again, by heroic striving the need was met, and now a student can enter a Catholic kindergarten when he is four, and can finally gain a doctorate in chemical research, without ever having darkened the door of a non-Catholic school, and without ever having had one moment of his schooling paid for by the state. One can only admire the perseverance of those who made this possible.

Catholic institutions of higher learning have now been in existence in this country long enough to make a general evaluation possible. One might ask if they have fulfilled the primary purpose of their foundation, which was to give a liberal or professional education which was just as good as that given by the secular schools, but under conditions which would not endanger the students' faith. To this one can say yes. Graduates from our schools are as good doctors or lawyers or engineers or journalists or scholars as are those who come from elsewhere; and in general they do not lose their faith in the course of their education, whereas there is a truly great mortality among Catholic students who go to state schools.

I think also that it is safe to say that moral standards are higher among those who graduate from our colleges and universities than among those who received an equivalent education elsewhere. This is not easy to prove, but I have had my opinion confirmed by conversations with students who have come back to school after their war service. They are practically unanimous in saying that in their experience it was far easier to maintain a Christian standard amid the temptations of military life if you had as your companions men from Catholic colleges. If you made your friends among men from other schools you were sunk. This is strong testimony, coming as it does from young men who are inclined to be quite critical of the school they are attending.

Our Catholic system of higher education has succeeded in what it was designed to do. But the cost has been so tremendous, particularly in the professional schools where extensive equipment is required, that the administrators of the schools have had to devote most of their attention to the desperate raising of money. This situation often produces in the school an atmosphere of tension, a sensitiveness to current economic conditions, and to

the opinion of potential donors, which detracts from the calm dignity which an academic institution should have. Moreover, since donations to Catholic colleges never will equal the money available to state schools through taxation, the former can never match the latter in equipment and seldom in teachers' salaries.

It would be possible for our colleges to create among their teachers a dignity and an *esprit de corps* which would more than compensate for lack of equipment and lower pay. The medieval universities, in which the teachers were organised in what amounted to craft guilds, set a pattern of professorial autonomy, co-operation and dignity which gave the master of arts a position of great respect not only in the academic world but in society at large. The modern European universities have to a certain extent preserved this exalted position of the teacher. The American secular universities have unfortunately tended to abandon the guild pattern and to assimilate themselves to the pattern of industry with its chronic conflict between labour and management; and the Catholic schools have not been slow to follow suit.

The tension which has resulted between the teachers and the 'administration' by the following of this industrial pattern has in our Catholic schools been somewhat augmented by the fact that these schools, almost all of them, were founded and are still operated by religious communities and were until rather recently staffed almost completely by members of these communities, who were, of course, under religious obedience. These religious teachers did not partake at all of the autonomy of the medieval teaching guild. Their relation to their superiors was externally analogous to the relation between teachers and 'administration' in the secular schools. They did what they were told, and the superiors made the decisions.

When, because of the expansion of the schools in size and in variety of subjects taught, lay teachers became so numerous as to be the rule rather than the exception, the problem of the relation of these teachers to the government of the school became acute. It has remained so, and small progress has been made toward its solution. There is in the teaching profession a need for respect and for self-determination. This need is violated by the condition of being an employee. From my acquaintance with lay teachers in our Catholic colleges I would say that they all feel that they are treated as employees. None of them likes it. Some of these shrug

if off with a kind of general cynicism. Others resent it deeply and wish for a teachers' union. Others leave for the state schools where they think, probably wrongly, that conditions are better. The tragedy is that many of these men wish heartily to devote their lives to Catholic education, but find that they are never allowed really to belong to the institution for which they are asked to sacrifice themselves. They 'just work there'. If our schools could find a way to incorporate the teacher into their midst as a first-class citizen they would be making a valuable contribution to American education as a whole. If we would only develop what is best in our own Catholic academic tradition we could be educational leaders instead of followers. The medieval universities provide a pattern.

It may be that our tendency to follow rather than to strike out independently comes from the initial circumstances under which our Catholic educational system in America was inaugurated. Our aim was to duplicate the state system. We wanted schools that were 'just as good' as the public schools. When we raised our ambition beyond primary and secondary education, the 'just as good' theme still dominated. We wanted to turn out doctors and lawyers and engineers who were just as good as those educated elsewhere, and now we want to produce research scholars who are just as eminent as those who graduate from Harvard or Columbia. This long struggle for the 'just as good' has made a rather disastrous imprint on our collective educational mentality. We have tended to become imitators; and that means that we inevitably lag a step behind others. We follow the same course as they, but some years later. What results is that, as someone has aptly said, our schools give a secular education with a medal pinned on it.

As long as Catholics thought that the supreme purpose of their colleges was to train up a class of intellectuals and professional people who could take a respected place in American society while still remaining Catholic, the medal pinned on the breast of secular training was sufficient indication that the training was religiously satisfactory. Now however there is a dawning realisation in many quarters that the medal is not enough. We are beginning to see that it is not enough to produce men who will take places of distinction in American society. That society itself is in danger of collapse; and what is most necessary is that this

society be sustained by being made Christian. In the face of this newly realised need, the old ideal is seen to be inadequate.

American secular higher education has produced many experts in many fields, but the declining morale of our society is proof that it has not given us leadership of the right kind in the right places. This being true, it seems hardly wise to assume that this same kind of education will give much better results if the medal is pinned on—if, that is, courses in 'religion' are added and Mass is celebrated in close geographical proximity to the lecture-rooms.

The mysterious working of the Spirit is producing in our time a new type of person: the apostolic layman. His ambition is to restore all things in Christ. One encounters him everywhere. If this man is to do his work well he must be thoroughly educated. He must know the 'all things' that are to be restored. He must know what restoration is. And he must know Christ and who he is. Besides knowing all this he must know how to carry on his function as an agent of restoration.

Who could suppose that a secular education with a medal pinned on it would be adequate to such an end? The system designed to produce men who can take respected places in the existing society cannot fulfil the needs of men whose aim is to renew society. The apostolic laymen baffles our educators. They regard him as slightly lunatic and he regards them as superficial. He also, it must be said, baffles the clergy. He has plenty of rough edges that must be smoothed down, plenty of one-sided ideas that need balancing. But in spite of this juvenility he is the man of the future. The respectable man, well adjusted to his world, cannot handle a situation in which his world is falling apart. The system which is built to produce such men has little to offer in times of crisis.

It would seem then that our Catholic institutions of higher learning, having acquitted themselves well in the age that has passed, are now faced with new needs that call for a complete re-thinking of aims, methods, and curriculum. If they are flexible enough to provide an adequate education for the apostolic layman they will play an honourable part in the restoration of all things in Christ. If not, they will recede to the status of more or less respected fossils, and new institutions will rise up to do the work.