

The Vocation of the Catholic Woman Teacher

ALEX ALEXANDER

The teaching profession has for a long time been recognized as a normal sphere of influence for women. But even among Catholics, teaching is too often considered as no more than a profession; in other words, simply a means of livelihood requiring a high degree of training or specialized knowledge. It is, in fact, very much more. At this time, when observations and educational theories are current subjects of interest and discussion, it is perhaps worth trying to make some assessment of the teaching vocation to which both lay women and teaching religious are called by God.

It is at last being recognized by both clergy and laity that in these days the term 'vocation', for so long restricted to the meaning of a call to life in the cloister, has in fact a very much wider sense. Now it is understood, rather, as the call of God to the individual to follow a particular path that he reveals to them. Teaching is one of these paths, in which God asks close co-operation in his redemptive work on individuals. It is essential, therefore, that this should not be lost to sight, or better perhaps that it should be more clearly realized than is always the case at present.

While types of education, primary, secondary modern, grammar school, and so on are convenient ways of dividing children of various ages and abilities, it is of vital importance to remember that the vocation of a teacher, and especially of a Catholic, transcends all such divisions. It is true that each division or age-group presents its own problems, and that those whose special task it is to deal with each group should possess, or acquire, the spiritual and mental equipment for dealing with them. It is a truism which cannot however be too often stated, that the teacher is primarily an educator, and that the verb 'to educate' has the implication of drawing out rather than pouring in. But the lay teacher's function lies not in that alone, or rather it depends on the definition of what constitutes an educator. Fundamentally, it is a spiritual rather than a material function. One might go so far as to declare that all the material benefits that a teacher can give to her pupils are to a great

extent dependent on her conception of this spiritual function.

In this age of broken homes, lack of parental discipline and decline of moral standards, and indeed of the more precocious maturity of the adolescent girl, the importance of this spiritual function grows in proportion to the lack of standards and stability that the child may find outside school life.

The Catholic teacher is in a position of great responsibility with regard to the girls with whom she comes in contact. She must therefore first of all have defined with complete clarity in her own life her relation to God in so far as she knows her work to be inspired by him and done for him and with him. Secondly, she must be ready to provide, by example, and if need be, by precept, moral standards for the adolescents with whom she is dealing.

The mere imparting of facts seems to come far down in this estimate of qualifications, which may be deplored by some whose awareness of the imminence of, say, the 11 + examination, or of G.C.E. at some level, is an ever-present reminder of work that must be done, of ground that must be covered. Nevertheless, the insistence on spiritual values is in fact of greater and more lasting importance than may be realized. Children judge instinctively, and their judgment is often terrifyingly accurate. They are, like adults, more inclined to take note of what one is, rather than what one says, but with this difference: their capacity to absorb facts can depend to a considerable extent on their assessment of the person teaching them.

A deep spiritual awareness of God's will in this matter is the essential factor governing the teacher's approach to her pupils. God wants her not to do just any job, but this particular job: to co-operate with him in the formation and development of human beings. In fact, it is a type of spiritual parenthood. Once teaching is seen in this light, it becomes clear how vitally important the teacher's role is. It presupposes the realization of the divine origin of every one with whom she deals, and so of her duty to love. Each person must be loved in and for God, and handled with the care and reverence that Christ our Lord always accorded to all with whom he dealt. Clearly, then, the teacher's responsibility is tremendous, particularly towards the idle, the 'problem child', the 'black sheep'. No matter how exasperating they may be, it is part of her vocation of spiritual parenthood to love and to serve each one as Christ would love and serve them in her place. This does not mean turning a blind eye to all faults and misdemeanours, but it does mean knowing when to punish and when to spare. For this kind of

knowledge she will turn to the Holy Ghost, who never leaves unanswered the prayers of those who ask for this kind of guidance.

On this fundamental awareness depends the second factor: the ability to provide moral standards, in particular for those who can get no help from their family. This may be achieved by the teacher only indirectly; if God is in control of all her actions her pupils can become aware that someone else far transcends her own personality. She must be ready always to efface herself so that God may exert his own paramount influence on his children. It will follow, then, if God is to be loved in his children, and if they are to be made aware of him, no trouble can be too great to achieve the furtherance of his aim. She must always be readily accessible to all, so that if God wishes to work through her, she may be a docile instrument in his hands.

Little has been said so far about what might be considered by some to be the main work of the teacher: imparting knowledge. It might be supposed that this is merely routine work, but that is far from being the case. The function of the teacher is to draw out. Often there is danger of this fact being forgotten because of the pressure of events. But it involves the teaching, not merely of facts, but of how to judge them; not merely of events, but the discovery of the reasons for them; not merely the acceptance or rejection of literary standards, but the comprehension of all that lies behind them. In short, it is the formation of the whole person, who on leaving school will have to think, reason, accept and reject, not just the dates of a series of battles, but the social and political events of the day and their implications; not just the literary value of Shakespeare's works, but the value of the opinions of the daily press.

This, then, is the work for which God has destined his teachers: to achieve, in union with him, the spiritual, intellectual, and moral formation of the persons with whom they come in contact.

In view of the need for a fresh approach to the problems of education today, and also of the publicly expressed concern of members of the hierarchy about the lack of religious vocations among women, it may not be out of place to estimate how far convents today are meeting the needs of the children of the 1960s. As a lay member of the profession, who has nevertheless come into contact with convent-educated girls from differing backgrounds and institutions, may I express a tentative opinion?

In the first place, may I make it clear that I have the greatest respect for the work done by convent schools as a whole. They have a role of

great importance to fulfil in the education and training of Catholic girls as future professional women and as future mothers of families. At their best, they are in fact producing a large proportion of integrated young women, trained to think and to judge facts, to produce balanced opinions, and thoroughly grounded in their faith.

But in my experience I have also come across a considerable number of girls whose attitude to their education makes it clear that their needs have not been met or really understood. These girls long for the day when they will escape from a domination resented and misunderstood. Could this be because not only is it imperfectly understood by these girls but also because the type of education received by them has been based on an outmoded conception, not only of what constitutes education, but of the life and role of a teaching religious today and its function in forming educators of women?

If religious are to be in the front rank of educators today, as they have been, and in many ways still are, might not some reform prove to be necessary, not just of the educational system, but of something more radical - a reassessment of the vocational spirit of teaching orders, and possibly a reorientation of some aspects of their training, that they may be of still greater value in dealing with the child of today and its extremely complex problems?

The vocation of a teaching religious would appear to be twofold: it is to belong completely to God as his spouse and in him to achieve that spiritual maternity whereby each child met and handled is truly loved, because it bears the imprint of its divine parentage. She must have for it the deep and tender love of a parent, and at the same time the ability to see, and to help it to subdue, its faults and weaknesses, which are the products not only of its environment and age, but of its individual temperament. Finally, she has the task of helping it to achieve a wholeness and sanity of outlook without which it is liable to enter adult life spiritually or mentally maimed or afraid, unable to cope either with itself or with the problems which confront it.

This result cannot be achieved by a community's meticulous fidelity to a set of rules drawn up for their formation, which may produce members perfectly conforming to a pattern, but probably one belonging to the last century, and therefore out of touch with the modern generation and unable to grasp its needs. Nor can it be achieved by a refusal to look the more unpleasant aspects of twentieth century life in the face, and a consequent effort (doomed to failure) to persuade the girls that such problems do not in fact exist.

What seems to be necessary, then, in such cases, is a radical reassessment of the type of training that novices in teaching orders should undergo. It must be one in which their spiritual maternity should be emphasized, in no sentimental or pietistic way; on the contrary, sentimentality will achieve nothing but harm. All that their spouse demands of them must be clearly and realistically presented and their total abandonment to him stressed, but at the same time their intellectual formation must not be neglected. This is of vital importance, especially since the young religious may have had neither the time nor the opportunity before her entry into the novitiate to embark on any serious intellectual training. A university degree, while valuable for some types of teaching, is not by any means the only requisite. What is of far greater importance is the training of a young religious in judgment in both spiritual and intellectual matters; in knowledge of the problems to be met in the everyday life of adolescent girls; in awareness of the need for frank speaking on certain occasions, and a readiness to meet it. It is a well-known fact that girls often recoil from confiding in their parents, and they are frequently thankful to find an adult whom they respect and trust, and who can help them with their difficulties. In secular life lay teachers may be the ones to whom they turn; but very often it is said, if their teachers are nuns: they won't speak of things, they don't understand, we cannot talk to them. In cases where no other adults are available this is disastrous, as the girls are forced back on themselves, sometimes with tragic results.

Closely connected with the need for the reorientation of the teaching religious is also the need for a change in their presentation of religion to the average girl. It is a matter of surprise to some that so many of the young girls who lapse are those who have had the 'best' i.e., a convent education. It is really not surprising at all. Religion which becomes a set of facts 'rammed down one's throat', as many have described it, has neither meaning nor appeal, and will be the first burden to be thrown off on leaving, with the other restrictions of school life. One can hardly imagine that girls who have been compelled to learn by heart the first chapter of Acts will be inspired to appreciate the burning love that St Paul felt for his Christians or his burning desire to die for them if need be. If religion cannot be presented as the joyful means of attaining a knowledge and love of God, who is more real and more exciting and more full of joy than anything that this world can offer, then the presentation of religion is a failure, not religion itself. Young people are still capable of heroism and self-sacrifice if they are appealed to in a

way calculated to arouse these virtues, but they will not be aroused by mechanical repetition of 'doctrine' lessons, nor yet by long retreats, for which they are entirely unsuited. In these days of noise and canned amusement, children have lost much of their power of concentration, most of their ability for reflection (except in a minority of cases) and almost all appreciation of the value of silence. These things can be revived in them, but only with the exercise of great care and in small doses over an extended period. A week's retreat, or, indeed, two or three days of protracted silence are more likely to produce boredom, furtive communication by means of notes, and a thorough detestation of the entire process, which will never willingly be endured again once schooldays are over. The young adolescent is not naturally able to pick out what is essentially of value from such religious education and retain it, but is far more likely to reject the whole conception of religion. This is particularly true of those who are less intelligent, and whose judgment, unless it has been carefully trained over the years, is extremely faulty. It is difficult to undo later the harm which has been done.

Until the importance of this double vocation of religious as nuns and teachers is clearly realized and generally practised it is likely that these problems will increase. Not until this primary problem has been solved will it be possible to reform the attitude of the convent to the children, and of the children to religion and so to God.

Is it not possible that a change in orientation, the presentation of both factual learning and of religion itself may take on a deeper meaning for the children for whom it is destined, and that this may prove in its turn to be a new means of attracting girls into the religious life of at any rate an active, if not a contemplative community?