

THE NECESSITY OF RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

The Right Rev. Dr. Hedley, Bishop of Newport (England), in the course of a Pastoral Letter, dealt with 'The Necessity of Religious Knowledge.' Bishop Hedley wrote in part as follows:—

It is difficult to speak too strongly of the necessity, for Catholics of all ages, all ranks and all conditions, of adequate instruction in their holy religion. There never has been a time when religious instruction has not been necessary, or when it has not been pressed upon young and old by the solicitude of the Church. But our own times are distinguished by a vast increase and a rapid circulation of every sort of information. Religious knowledge has to compete with knowledge of every kind, for a place and position in limited human minds. There have been times when it was either religious information or emptiness; religion, and things connected with religion, were almost all that multitudes of simple people could ever be in the way of learning. Now knowledge is everywhere; history, politics, social science, physics, mechanics, games, stories, and gossip—there is an overflowing supply every morning and evening; much of it weak, washy, and demoralising; but, all the same, fairly satisfying to the indolent minds of the multitude.

One of the most disturbing features of Catholic life in these days is the difficulty so many seem to have in realising that there is only one Church, and in understanding the sinfulness and the misfortune of heresy and schism. It is because their instruction is so shallow. In their approach to the Sacraments they follow custom, convention, worldly convenience, and not unfrequently the dictates of human respect, because the great doctrines of grace are vaguely known and quite unfamiliar. The life of our Lord, with the deep mysteries which it presupposes, is outside of their thought and reading; and they are more or less strangers to Bethlehem, to Nazareth, and to Calvary. The impressive liturgy of the Church is to them almost a sealed book; the Christian year passes by, and has little significance, except so far as the names of its feasts and seasons are made use of by the world. The august worship and ritual of the Church is too often as mysterious to them as it is to Protestants; they have never learned to understand it.

The Result of Ignorance.

All these uncomfortable features of our Catholic life are in a great measure the result of a blameworthy ignorance. And there is another, which is perhaps the worst of all. When Catholics in these days give up or deny their religion, it is, as a rule, far more because they are ignorant than because they are impious or irreligious. It is a fact that we often find Catholics, in fairly good positions, well-disposed to their Church and to their priest, and not neglectful of the practice of their faith, suddenly, when a worldly temptation faces them, simply giving in, because they do not think that it matters.

If they had been well-grounded in the study of faith, obedience, and self-denial, it is certain that they would have acted in a very different way. In order to feel with the Church, to be sensitive to Catholic life, and to be penetrated with the Catholic spirit, one must have been carefully imbued with Catholic teaching, either from childhood or afterward. A mere smattering of Catholicism is not sufficient to penetrate the complex fabric of the human heart, and to protect the mysterious structure which we call human nature from the noxious atmosphere and the adverse influences which it has to encounter in the world where its lot is cast.

Religious instruction and formation should begin with the earliest years of childhood. Long before reason is attained, and the child becomes a fully responsible agent, there are feelings tinged with the intelligence that is still below the horizon; aspirations that could rise only in an immortal spirit; good and bad tendencies, more or less under control; the awakening of a sense of duty, and intermittent breathings of piety toward a dimly-known Father above. From the beginning, before a child can hardly know, its feelings and its actions should be trained to the good and the right.

One never knows how much a child takes in, if, by skilful repetition and exhibition, he is kept to the simple essentials of the Christian view; and if his unresting, though immature, mind is thus led to work out for itself relations and consequences which at first will be dark and confused, like the troubled waters of a flooded stream, but will every day run clearer. These childish exercises will be all the more powerful in the formation of character because they are the mind's own work. And if, at this momentous period of a child's life, it can be protected from evil impression from bad example, and from foolish and ignorant parents and nurses, the first teachings of sacred Christian truth will expand daily, and the heart will bloom like the 'garden of the Lord.'

It is at this time that the elementary instruction on confession and Communion is given to the child, to enable it to fulfil its obligations as a Catholic. These instructions include two great movements of the heart: sorrow for having offended so good a Father, and that special and beautiful response of human nature to divine beneficence which is called forth by the greatest of gifts—the Blessed

Sacrament. Only in the rarest cases will there be any difficulty in inspiring the young candidate with repentance, good resolution, piety, and gratitude.

Reason, Discernment, and Responsibility.

After infancy and the first approach to the Sacraments, there comes a time, which we may reckon to be of from four to six years, when the whole of the Catechism is being gradually imparted to the growing boy or girl. We have now to deal with reason, with discernment, with responsibility. Candidates can be made to understand the seriousness and gravity of life. They can apprehend the august majesty of God, the Creator, the last end, the Judge of the living and the dead. They can be made to appreciate the difference between the broad way and the narrow. They can be effectively shown that this life is a preparation for an eternal life to come, and that future happiness depends upon present effort. It will soon be clear to them how Jesus Christ came from heaven to redeem them, and to stand by them in every step of life; and how He has left His Spirit in His place here below, moving and acting in a visible kingdom, called the Church; and taking hold of men and women in a most direct and tangible way in the dispensation which we call the Sacraments, of which the most mighty is the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. They can be made to enter into their own nature, to understand its noble capabilities and aspirations, its depravities and shortcomings, and the grand healing and repairing forces of the grace of Jesus Christ.

All these subjects are handled by the instructor during these years of adolescence, in the text of the Catechism, in the lessons of Sacred History, and in the official and specially blessed utterances of the consecrated priest from the steps of the sanctuary.

It is not necessary, at this moment, to enter into the details of the Catechism. There is, for all our missions and schools, a carefully considered syllabus of religious instruction, which, if it is faithfully followed, will secure a good training in his or her religion for any child that remains a suitable time at school. It is very important that the mind of Christians should quickly learn to grasp the facts of this marvellous universe, which is nowhere described in the text-books of science, and which the modern spirit would fain keep out of the pages of history. The fresh and untired attention of a boy or girl meets here with just the satisfaction that draws and attracts it. Only let the tale be told skilfully, the points put clearly, and the essential doctrines made definite enough; and the young mind never altogether loses its hold thereon, even when other knowledge pours in and other interests make their demands on the human powers.

Catholic Citizenship.

Another powerful effect which may be, and ought to be, produced on the Catholic boy and girl by the Catechism is the sentiment of Catholic citizenship, or, as it may be expressed, the pride and joy of belonging to the Catholic family. Let us call it a sentiment; for it is more than a sentiment, for it is grounded on human nature and divine sanction. In human things, it is natural that sons and daughters who grow up in the bosom of a happy family, with noble traditions, in peace and in safety, should feel that their inheritance is precious. But the family or Kingdom of Christ, in whom we are all one with a unity transcending flesh and blood, far surpasses, in nobility, glory, and security, anything else that there is upon earth.

If the instruction of a Catholic soul has been carried out with regularity and good results during the time of childhood and of youth, then there remains the equally important work of carrying on that instruction from youth to maturity and old age. What is it that generally happens? It is that the large majority of our people practically forget their Catechism three or four years after they have finished it. This is true not merely of those who have to work with their hands; it happens also with those who have an education which should make it easy for them to keep up a certain cultivation of mind, and who have time to read. With the working class, it is either because they seldom read anything, or because the only things they do read are the frivolities and stupidities of the hour. With the more leisured classes, it is because they have so much pressed upon them in the shape of business, gossip, and fiction that they never make time to attend to religion. An additional reason is that they do not attend sermons and instructions in church, and do not know—because they do not trouble to find out—suitable Catholic books and periodicals.

Now it must be clearly understood that everyone without exception is capable of keeping up his religious knowledge. All he has to do is to listen, to read, and to think. There are plenty of instructive sermons, there are plenty of useful books, and there is no man or woman who should not find the time to devote to religious instruction. This is a duty which we all owe to God and our immortal souls.

A well known writer says that 'the hardest thing in the world is self-control, and the saving of money means the exercising of self-control in all directions at once. That is what makes saving so hard for most people.' But if they use Houndai-Lanka tea they save money without any sacrifices, because they get a first-class article at a very moderate price....