

The Montessori Method and Catholicism

(EDWIN M. STANDING, B.Sc., in the *Irish Rosary*.)

Most educational movements have certain more or less definite spiritual affinities. These may be clearly known and consciously acknowledged—as in the case of Jesuit Colleges and Convent Schools, or of Sectarian institutions, such as those carried on under the auspices of the Anglicans, Baptists, or Seventh Day Adventists. In other cases, however, the spiritual affinities are known only by implication, as, for example, in those schools where it is proclaimed that “no religious dogma is taught,” or where there is “ample liberty for each to believe as he pleases.”

One of the most striking and vigorous educational movements of our day is that which is associated with the name of the great Italian Lady Doctor, Maria Montessori. In less than two decades, schools according to her method have been established in practically every country in Europe. And not only in Europe, but also in America, Africa, Australia, Palestine, and even in India and China. Furthermore, not only those directly interested in education, but in addition psychologists, doctors, statesmen, scientists, artists and philosophers have felt the impact of this movement, and have responded to it in various ways.

Not the least concerned at its rapid development are those leaders of the different religious denominations, who are particularly interested in the religious training of the young. “What are the spiritual affinities of this Montessori Movement? What is its religious trend? Or has it any special religious affinities at all?” These are the questions that are being asked about it. And the conclusions that are come to are interesting and instructive, and at first sight not a little puzzling.

On the one hand we find a certain number of Catholic writers vigorously sounding the note of alarm. They announce that they have discovered in it the seeds of heresy. It is based, they say, on a philosophy which is a glorification of the natural man, and implicitly denies the Doctrine of the Fall.

Yet, in spite of these vigorous denunciations, the Montessori movement steadily continues to grow. Students come literally from every quarter of the globe to study the method; fresh converts are being made, and new schools are springing up, and these not only amongst Protestants but actually in Catholic Convents—spreading these pernicious doctrines, as it were in the very bosom of the Church.

Now the curious thing about it all is this, that while a few Catholic theologians fight shy of the Montessori principles—because they think they have detected in them anti-Catholic tendencies—certain Protestants, who have kept a discerning eye on the history of the movement in various countries, have been seized with the uncomfortable apprehension that there exists some mysterious but essential connection between the Montessori movement and Catholicism.

On the face of it, there seems to be much more to be said from their point of view.

In the first place, the movement is known to have emanated from Italy—a Catholic country; and the most successful pioneer work was done in that country and in Spain—another stronghold of Catholicism. Furthermore, those who have come into intimate personal contact with Doctor Montessori know her to be a genuine—in fact an ardent—Catholic. She has had personal interviews with the late and also the present Holy Father. The writer himself has seen a signed photo of the late Pope which had been presented to the Dottressa in fatherly recognition of her work among the *Bambini*. It was accompanied by a few written words of sympathy and encouragement.

It is not difficult to imagine Protestants of a certain type—ever watchful against the “subtle machinations of Rome”—reading into these simple circumstances, evidences of a new and subtle form of Popish propaganda. But this is not all that can be said from the Protestants’ point of view. The strongest argument has still to be stated, and even to a Catholic, it is a very interesting one.

It is this. It has happened—whether by chance or otherwise (we think otherwise)—that a considerable number of those persons in Protestant countries, who have thrown themselves most enthusiastically and persistently into the movement, have actually become converts to Rome. The present writer himself knows personally some half-dozen of the leading supporters of the Montessori movement—from America, England, and Holland—who have thus been led to change their religious convictions. It is small wonder, therefore that, knowing these things, certain Protestants have acquired an uneasy feeling that the “Trail of Rome” is over the movement. Indeed, one would not be surprised to hear it said in some quarters that the whole Montessori movement—“if you could only get to the bottom of it”—is another Jesuit Plot!

How is this paradoxical state of affairs to be accounted for? Whatever else it may mean, it certainly suggests that the Montessori method is not such a simple thing as some would suppose; otherwise it could hardly combine in itself, without contradiction, elements which give rise to such contradictory criticisms.

It would be beyond the scope of a short article to attempt to answer this question in detail: the following suggestions must suffice:

First, with regard to the objections which have been raised by a few Catholic theologians. For the most part these generally spring from a misapprehension of what Dr. Montessori means by Liberty in Education. It sometimes happens that students of her writings—not of her method as actually seen in practice—read into them the notion that Liberty in Education means that the child is allowed to do just what it likes. In other words, that its natural instincts are to be allowed free play in every direction. Dr. Montessori, of course, does not mean this, though certain passages in her books—taken

out of their true context—might give some such impression. We will give a few passages which bear on this point:—

“Discipline must come through liberty. Here is a great principle which is difficult for the followers of the ordinary school methods to understand. . . .

“If discipline is founded upon liberty, the discipline itself must necessarily be *active*. We do not consider an individual disciplined only when he has been rendered artificially silent and as immovable as a paralytic. He is an individual annihilated, not disciplined. . . .

“The first idea that the child must acquire, in order to be actively disciplined, is that of the difference between *good* and *evil*; and the task of the educator lies in seeing that the child does not confound *good* with *immobility*, and *evil* with *activity*, as often happens in the old-time discipline. And all this because our aim is to discipline for activity, for work, for good—not for immobility and not for passivity.

“A room in which all the children move about usefully, intelligently, and voluntarily, without committing any rough or rude act, would seem to me a class-room very well disciplined indeed.”

It will be seen from these passages that the doctrine of discipline by liberty is by no means the same thing as allowing all the natural instincts to go unchecked. It is not an untrammelled glorification of the “natural man.”

In any case it would be absurd to suggest that Mme. Montessori, who is a loyal Catholic, could disbelieve in the doctrine of the Fall of Man. The present writer once heard Dr. Montessori discussing the question of Infant Baptism with a Quaker. The latter, in common with most of the Sect to which he belonged, was much disquieted over the teaching of the Church in regard to the fate of babies who die unbaptised. Dr. Montessori, after some preliminary remarks as to the limited function of the intellect and the necessity of Faith, expressed herself as follows: “When you come to a more intimate knowledge of the Catholic Church, you will realise more and more—not that she is anxious to retain the effects of sin—but rather that she does everything she can to get rid of them.” And later on, when the Quaker was taking his leave she remarked: “You need not worry yourself over the unbaptised babies! You may rest assured that—*anxious* as you are yourself about their welfare—Almighty God is infinitely more so.” (The Quaker, by the way, has since become a Catholic.)

It is only fair to mention, however, that Madame Montessori never makes the slightest attempt to proselytise amongst the hundreds of students that come from all over the world to attend her courses; and seldom, if ever, directly refers to her particular religious convictions, unless definitely challenged. In fact—in the writer’s opinion—she is inclined to keep them too much in the background. (To be continued.)