

The Influence Of Reading On The Christian Family

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ONE need not be a close observer of the signs of the times to become convinced of the wise counsel exercised by The Catholic Truth Society in devoting the whole week of this year's Conference to the discussion of various aspects of Family Life. To foresee dangers ahead, to sound a warning note, and to adopt suitable precautionary measures against these dangers, is but common sense as well as a hopeful means of success, should further action be called upon.

Although hitherto, by God's grace, we have been comparatively free from many evils which elsewhere have become rooted vices, we cannot close our eyes to the fact that, through the agency of the Press and in many other ways, an insidious campaign is being carried on, which threatens some of our most cherished institutions.

Prominent among the legacies bequeathed by our fore-fathers is a high ideal of the stability, dignity and sanctity of Family Life. Recognising the teaching of the Church on the Sacrament of Matrimony as that of Christ Himself, the duties and obligations of this Sacrament have ever been to our people an inexorable law. Occasional defections from this ideal have only served to strengthen and emphasise their deep reverence for the sacredness of the marriage vow and to impel them to reflect this conviction more perfectly in their lives.

Outside the Catholic Church there is a tendency to regard the Sacrament of Matrimony from a purely material standpoint, and to view it as a mere human contract subject to the change and development of circumstances. On the other hand, Catholic Truth — which never varies — maintains the stability of family life as constituted by God in the beginning and re-established by Christ, Who, to confirm and bless the bond, gave it the fulness of Sacramental efficacy. Although Catholic teaching on family life has been extensively treated during the week, I should like briefly to draw your attention to a few points of importance extracted from the Encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII.

"The family life," he tells us, "was founded by God and intended by Him to be the source from which the human race should spring and continue to exist."... "It comes before Society and is its basis."... "The family is the cradle of Civil Society, and it is, in great part, within the domestic circle that the destinies of nations are prepared."

Again he writes: —

"It is universally admitted that prosperity, both public and private, depends principally on the constitution of the family, the greater the solicitude of parents to instil into their children, by word and example, the principles of religion, the more beneficial will be the results for the Common Good."

He then goes on to say: —

"But the family has a higher destiny than material ease and comfort. Since man's destiny is not this world, but the enjoyment of eternal bliss in heaven, the real end of the family is to bring children into the world, to make them children of the Church, to educate them and bring them up in the religion of the true God and of Jesus Christ our Saviour, that afterwards they may become fellow citizens of the Saints and familiars of God for all eternity."

There is, therefore, a fundamental connection between the family and man's eternal destiny; and the family, in working out this destiny becomes the leaven of Society and the true source of the strength and stability of the State. If all who are interested in the Common Good and upon whom rests the responsibility and opportunity of ameliorating the social evils everywhere prevalent, if rulers and subjects, employers and employed, recognised and acted upon the truths that have been enunciated and explained during the week, then, indeed, lasting benefits for rich and poor and for the world at large, would undoubtedly ensue.

Parents, therefore, have from God a noble, a sublime commission; it is to co-operate with Christ in the work which He came upon earth to accomplish. As in His case, it involves sacrifice. It imposes grave responsibility, for the due discharge of which man's natural powers are wholly inadequate. But God never imposes impossible burdens, whether in the natural or supernatural order. He proportions His help to the services He demands, provided man makes use of the opportunities afforded him and places no obstacles in the way. In order that man may attain the end of his being, divine grace is indispensable, but many secondary helps are given too, and among these helps — after the spoken word of God — perhaps none is more necessary or more useful than reading, provided, of course, it be of the proper kind. All God's gifts are good, but may be abused. Frequently, in the domain of literature, they are grossly abused, so that in this respect, as in all other departments of the Christian Life, one must never forget the motto:

"Avoid evil and do good."

To speak of the influence of reading on the family is but to reiterate what has been said over and over again at every meeting of this Society since its foundation. Beyond all doubt it may be said, that in these days, the greatest dangers that beset the path of those who would lead a truly Catholic life, be they old or young, are scattered over the literature that is served up for the reading public. The reading public here means everybody, and those, therefore, who would safeguard the divine ideal of family life, must save their homes from the defilements of an evil Press, which is being used for the dissemination of doctrines subversive not only of the teaching of Christ and His Church, but also of the Natural Law. Principles are advocated and recommended that have as their ultimate result the destruction not alone of the family but even of the race. Faith and morality are attacked; or, rather, faith through morality, for, as everyone of experience knows, once morality is effaced, loss of faith follows. Since the first sin, the devil has always found human agents to draw men away from the happiness for which they are destined, and these seem to progress more rapidly in devising new methods for sinning than the world in general progresses in its discoveries for the betterment of Society. And not the least active among these agents of Satan are the authors of infidel and immoral literature.

Concerning writers of this type, we may take the personal estimate of one of their number as descriptive of all. "I cannot," writes Rousseau, "look upon my books without shuddering; instead of instructing I corrupt; instead of nourishing the mind, I poison it, but, passion carries me away, and, with all my eloquent discourses, I am simply a murderer." This is the self-appreciation of a French

writer: and what happened in France and other European countries may happen in our own if we are indifferent or careless about the reading matter we provide for ourselves and for those under our charge.

More dangerous in a sense than these grossly immoral or aggressively infidel productions which by their offensiveness repel all right-minded men, are the publications of various kinds, which, if not directly opposed to Catholic doctrine, are uncatholic in tone and sentiment; or, if not openly immoral, are, in their general tendency, sensational and always suggestive of evil thoughts against purity of mind and innocence of heart. They emanate from the pens of writers who have no belief in God or in the supernatural, or who ignore both and whose aim is to catch the interest of their readers by presenting in fascinating form and language the plots and schemes of men and women, whose only motives in life and action are the impulses of their nature and the gratification of sense. Such writings draw the mind away from God and fix it on the creature. It would be impossible to exaggerate the extent of the harm such books are capable of working especially on the impressionable minds of the young. Enervating and debasing their minds, they familiarise them with the worst things of which human nature is capable and lead them to think lightly of man's most sacred obligations and at the same time render them callous and indifferent to the sneers levelled at the practices of religion and at the truths of faith. There cannot be any doubt as to the grave obligations of parents in regard to such writings. The healthy man will not take unwholesome food nor give it to his family, however enticingly it be presented; much less will he swallow poison although it be enveloped in a gilded coating of sweetness. How much more careful, then, should he be to protect himself and his family from the pernicious influence of literature which is not merely hurtful, but ruinous to morals, poisonous to the faith, and destructive of the soul.

But the exclusion from the home of objectionable publications is only a first step in the Catholic parents' duty.

Good reading matter must be provided in the stead of this, not only as an antidote against it, but for the purpose of preserving and supplementing the knowledge accumulated during school life. The amount of knowledge acquired by even the best trained scholar is limited. Education creates a thirst for knowledge rather than imparts it, and it is the function of reading to maintain and add to the instruction received in early life.

The professional man, however brilliant the preparation for his future career may have been, will, if he bid good-bye to his books upon entering life, soon find himself without a clientele, whilst it may be said of the bulk of our people that they leave school at the commencement of their education. If, therefore, our people are to keep pace with the times, if they wish to be fully equipped for the proper discharge of all the duties of life, they must, by reading and study, keep up work well begun, or strive to supply what has been wanting in it. In general, one might lay down as a rule that the reading matter of a Catholic home should follow on the lines of what Catholic education ought to be.

Education is the development of all man's faculties, physical, mental and moral, so that he may be able to fulfil all the duties of his state of life; but since his ultimate destiny is eternal life, the Catholic ideal of education is that religion should be an essential and integral element in it, not merely a supplement to intellectual and moral training, and that religious training should be more than instruction in the truths of faith and the precepts of the Divine law, that it should include within its scope the duties of religion such as prayers and the reception of the Sacraments; in other words,

that Catholic truth and Catholic practice, that is, the Supernatural, should colour and vivify all man's activities.

For, it should be noted, the supernatural is not something that hovers around and over one when engaged in prayer and devotional exercises and afterwards retires on the approach of one's secular pursuits. When God raised man to the supernatural state, He did not destroy his nature, but perfected and supernaturalised it, so that man might be enabled to direct every act of his life towards his eternal welfare.

This is what St. Paul means when he says:

"Whether you eat or drink, or whatsoever else you do, do all for the glory of God." Hence the professional man, the merchant, the farmer, the workman may sanctify every act he performs in the discharge of his daily duties. So, too, may the athlete who, by his prowess, sheds lustre on himself and on his country, by the same display of skill, merit an eternal reward. To maintain that the reading matter of the Catholic home or of the individual, whoever he may be, should be of the character described, is not to restrict the liberty of anyone who professes Catholic principles, for, on the assumption that the reader recognises his duty to keep within the law of God in regard to what he reads, and not to spend in reading the time that is due to the ordinary pursuits of his calling in life, the quantity and quality of his reading are circumscribed only by his human limitations. Good literature covers the whole domain of learning and embraces, too, whatever contributes to pure entertainment and amusement in the matter of reading.

Tastes differ, and individuals will pursue divergent courses of reading, but the quest of genuine knowledge is the seeking after truth, and truth leads to God, Who is essential Truth. Hence there is no class of literature within the wide limits mentioned that may not be made to lead to edification as well as the development of secular knowledge. This is particularly true in regard to Biography and History. It should be unnecessary to make a special appeal for the reading and study of the history of our own country, yet there seems to be some need to do so. The conditions under which our people were educated in the past afford some excuse for the widespread ignorance of Irish History among our people.

The excuse no longer exists, at least in the greater part of Ireland. The remedy lies in our own hands, and its application would in time undo the harmful effects produced by overdoses of the histories of every country in Europe, ancient and modern, pagan and Christian, except Ireland.

In spite of the unworthy challenges that now and then, in these days, seem to be levelled against our right to the title of "Island of Saints and Scholars," history shows that learning and sanctity went hand in hand in the Golden Age of our past. But we do not recall the past for the mere pleasure of admiring its glories. Its lessons are of more practical importance for us. Why should we not strive under new and more favourable circumstances to emulate the learning of our forefathers? And, if we base our quest for knowledge as our ancestors did, on the teachings of the Gospel, there is no reason why we should not strive also to imitate them in those virtues which sanctified them, and diffused themselves over the continent of Europe.

Abundance of literature suitable for a Catholic can always be procured. Instructive, edifying and amusing works of the highest literary merit come from the Catholic Press to meet the want of the most fastidious, whilst Societies such as the Catholic Truth Society, cater for the simplest tastes and most restricted means, placing within the reach of the poorest families useful, if not altogether necessary help towards moral and intellectual improvement and pleasure. But since it is the eternal

that matters for all men, whatever be their avocation in life, it should be the aim of everyone to grow in the knowledge of God and of divine things, for we cannot perform our duties unless we know them. Men make great sacrifices in order to build up a name and a fortune for themselves. Parents do not grudge to spend themselves and, at times, even more in money than they can spare, that they may educate their children, that they may place and even maintain them in good worldly positions. It is not an unreasonable demand to make that they should bestow equal, even greater, care on "the one thing necessary," in seeing that the religious knowledge of their children should keep pace with the development of their intelligence, and that they should themselves keep alive and add to their own store of such knowledge. Our Divine Master Himself, the Evangelist tells us, grew in wisdom as He advanced in age.

If the fulfilment of this duty involved great labour or long hours, we should still look upon it as an obligation; but neither one nor the other is necessary. We have all at one time learned our penny Catechism, but how few of us knew it or even now know it! Between the covers of that little book may be found a programme of religious instruction that may be developed by the aid of simple commentaries, extensive enough to satisfy the cravings of ordinary minds and to teach men all the principles of Catholic life, and even of perfection.

This is what a learned and zealous priest of Experience — the Abbé Charpentier — has to say of the Catechism:

"The Catechism is an epitome of the teaching that Jesus Christ came on earth to bring to men. It is His Gospel. It ought to be the book of every Christian, of the rich man as well as of the poor, of the learned as well as of the ignorant, of the old as well as of the young. Fathers and mothers, legislators and chiefs of people, you desire for the family and for Society an instruction which will make children respectful and docile, workers honest and temperate, servants devoted to their masters, the rich generous to the poor; the poor resigned to the Will of God, subjects obedient without servility and free without lawlessness; an instruction which subjects industry to the yoke of faith, commerce to the laws of righteousness; an instruction, the beginning and foundation of true fraternity, which makes us see in each man a brother to be loved, to be respected, and to be helped in case of need. Take your Catechism, then, read it and repeat it to your children. The father seated by the fireside and surrounded by his children will make them repeat their Catechism lesson, he will add his own explanations and will relate to them a story from sacred history, from the life of Christ, or from the history of the Church."

Such a method of instruction is easy, and is sufficient to lead to a more perfect knowledge of God. The more God is known the more perfectly is He loved; and the home in which this love is cultivated will be the fruitful nursery of every domestic virtue. Love, purity, fidelity, obedience, self-sacrifice and consideration for others will flourish in such a home; and although the primary purpose of the family is the sanctification and salvation of its members, the practice of these virtues in the home will be the safeguard of society and of the State. "Each Christian family," says Leo XIII, "presents the likeness of the heavenly home; and the wondrous benefits thence resulting are not limited simply to the family circle, but spread abundantly over the whole State at large."
