The Adolescent In The Modern World

Reflections on Irish Youth, Catholic Ideals, and Life into the Sixties.

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THE MOST talked-of member of the community at present is the adolescent. Social workers find his attitude disappointing, and say so loudly and repeatedly.

Psychologists call on abstruse terms to explain him. Educationalists plan to protect and improve him. Adolescents are encouraged to be vocal in their own defence and to excuse their defects, while their parents are left under the impression that they are responsible for every fault found in the young people's conduct. What is to be thought of all this? What, in fact, is the adolescent, and how does life at the present time affect his development and growth?

PART 1.

Generally speaking, an adolescent is one who is in his teens. The period of adolescence may be taken for convenience to begin about 13 years of age and to have ended about 20. The characteristics, which distinguish the adolescent however, may sometimes begin earlier or may last longer. Much study has been devoted by psychologists and sociologists to this phase of a person's life, and from these studies, it is established that the term adolescence may denote a mental attitude as well as an age group. While it must be kept in mind that each individual is unique, and is exactly like no other, there are nevertheless certain characteristics, which are generally true of all, and most adolescents may be expected to display them. A knowledge of these features will help towards the better understanding of the individuals who belong to this important section of the community, on whom the future of society so largely depends.

ADOLESCENCE IN A PERIOD OF CHANGE.

What distinguishes the adolescent is not so much his age as the fact that he is a person who is in a stage of transition. He is passing from childhood to adulthood, and during the transition period is not firmly fixed in either category. The peculiar difficulties as well as the strength of the adolescent all spring from this and from his consciousness of it. As a child, he depended naturally on adults, and accepted their direction willingly. Now he is conscious of separate standards of judgment, which are his own. These he wants to apply, but he is still vaguely unsure of them. He feels that these independent standards of judgment should be sufficient, but he lacks experience in their use; so he tends to be hasty, even ruthless at times, and he cannot see the need for the diplomacy and tact or the careful timing and finesse which adults have learned to be necessary for the most economic use of the means available to them. Thus, he is insecure in his mind and impatient; he feels that his seniors have grown dull and unperceptive, and do not understand the world as well as he does. If his elders counsel restraint and patience, or discourage his enthusiasm or his hurry, he may look on this

as an attempt to justify their own inertia; if they criticise his methods, he is apt to think that they are jealous of his acuteness. He sees that his elders have grown accustomed to living with problems, which because he has just met them, seem to him to demand urgent solution. Thus, he is impatient to get to grips with the faults he finds so abundantly in life. He feels he has a solution, which he will not be allowed to apply. Sometimes indeed, that is unfortunately true, and knowledge of this increases the difficulty.

PHYSICAL GROWTH.

Physically the adolescent is conscious of new abilities. In the early stages, when bodily development is rapid, the young person is likely to shoot up and out unevenly at too fast a rate for proper control over muscular activity, with the result that he is awkward and ungainly for a time. This tends to make both boys and girls self-conscious and shy. A secondary result of the rapid physical growth of the period is the tendency to ‘grow out of’ clothes and this often causes inordinate difficulty. It may appear unimportant to an adult but to the peculiar temperament of the adolescent, it can be the source of great unhappiness. Skin blemishes are common at this time, and may produce the same effect. The development of the secondary sex-characteristics frequently serves to produce a similar result of self-consciousness.

All these factors combine to cause feelings of embarrassment in company, which is resented. This occurs, moreover, at a time when the desire to be thought much of, to be self-assured and self-possessed is vital, and it frequently gives rise to a reaction towards anti-social conduct, to a rebellious mood which is quite out of character with the docile boy or girl of a few years before. This behaviour can be disconcerting to those parents and elders who do not understand what is happening. In passing, we may remark that advertisers and salesmen often play on the adolescent’s fears and weakness in this matter of physical defects and social inexperience to further their sales of aids, books ‘cures’ or cosmetics. In doing so they take a very unfair advantage of young people by increasing their consciousness of these defects and do them great disservice.

EMOTIONAL GROWTH.

During this period, the sex powers develop to maturity, and with them the emotional changes, which accompany their growth. The adolescent discovers new desires and longings in himself and greater emotional capacities, the effects of which are frequently not understood. The company of the other sex becomes desirable, unlike the previous period in life, when a natural segregation separated the sexes, and the attitude of one sex to the other was one of contempt or bare toleration. This important change of attitude takes place at a time when the individual feels hampered by that self-consciousness and lack of confidence to which I have just referred. Easy social intercourse appears very desirable but even more difficult for him to attain. At the same time, a curiosity, which is natural, urges him to explore the newly discovered emotional possibilities, and he becomes aware of incipient inner conflict.

This conflict derives from inability to distinguish clearly between what is a natural attraction and what is undue acceptance of it, between restraining religious and social demands on the one hand, and his own unaccustomed desires and inclinations on the other. While it is true that this factor certainly causes great difficulty for many adolescents, it would be wrong to reduce all their tensions and difficulties to the one difficulty of awakening sex interest. Very many psychologists reject this as an unwarranted over-simplification of a complex period, though it is one that is almost universally accepted by popular writers. Psychologists do point out however that it is a factor,

which the social organization of the time tends to exaggerate and therefore accentuate. As modern society is organized, the hope of early marriage is a forlorn one for many, and yet propaganda is allowed to concentrate on the desirability of successful sex attraction for all young people thus causing difficulties, which could be avoided.

EMOTIONALLY UNSTABLE.

Another striking characteristic of adolescence, which accompanies this emotional growth and arises in part from it, is emotional instability. This instability is distressingly manifested in periods of enthusiasm and intense activity, which are followed for no obvious reason by periods of inertia, listlessness or apparent laziness. The rapid growth of the individual helps to account for it.

Moodiness, which swings from absorbing enthusiasm to indifference, is quite common, so that the reception, which a boy or a girl will give at a particular time to a proposal cannot be anticipated with any degree of certainty; the young person's interests or wants appear to vacillate with baffling suddenness, thus causing pardonable exasperation to his parents and others who are trying as earnestly as they can, to satisfy his demands, but cannot decide what he requires. Youth apparently wants so much here below, and does not want it long.

Now, failure on the part of the adolescent to make the proper adaptation to these physical and emotional changes results in an intensification of his feeling of insecurity, and consciousness of this, in turn, is the cause of a frustrating spiral of adolescent shyness. It is also responsible for his very definite and characteristic unwillingness to undertake new tasks or new works, unless he has been given confidence in his abilities by proper training beforehand, or is assured of an audience that is known to be sympathetic for he fears failing under the eyes of others.

This fear he will naturally try to hide. He will also hide, if he can, the fact that his unwillingness comes from this fear, and the means chosen to hide it normally is by assuming a mask of indifference. Adolescents want to try, but because they must make their efforts where they will be observed and are afraid they will fail, and feel miserable for failing in public, they pretend they are not interested.

REACTION AGAINST INSECURITY.

This pretence may deceive others, but it cannot deceive the adolescent himself. So, in order to counteract his shyness and feeling of insufficiency, and to bolster up his self-esteem, the adolescent may indulge in a form of bravado, which is made so obvious as to be a challenge, but is fundamentally the same insecurity displayed under another guise. It may take the form of aggressiveness, which looks like churlish bad manners, but in actual fact is nothing more than a tortured and pitiable attempt on the part of the young person to convince himself, and others, that he can get through life unaided, while he knows in his heart that he cannot. This aggressive antisocial behaviour will multiply when adolescents form into groups, as they tend to do. Then they will emulate one another in declaring their independence and asserting their indifference to the views and opinions and even the rights of others. It may sometimes, indeed, go further than mere declarations, but even if it does not, it will still result in swagger and boasting and noisy ostentation, exhibited at times in bizarre conduct and dress, or in a flouting of convention, which often leads the members of the group into regrettable actions and habits. This is particularly true where the groups are mixed ones, made up of boys and girls, for then one sex generally tries to impress the other in this way.

ADOLESCENT IDEALISM.

So far, I have been dealing with the more prominent characteristics of the adolescent. They are prominent because they are negative. But working against all these negative features is a positive one, which is much more important. In spite of all that is said of him the most valuable attribute of the adolescent is his idealism, which can lead him to the heights of successful endeavour. This idealism he will hide at first, for he fears cynicism from others and the danger of failing to live up to his own ideals, and he will reveal it only when he is sure that he has found a sympathetic friend. For this reason, its existence is often unnoticed, doubted, or denied. But all young people need ideals to aim at, and if they are not given them, they will find them where they can. In the early part of the period these ideals may be short-sighted and crude; they may be confined to success at games and so on, but they expand and develop with maturity. The fact that older people may look on their ideals as foolish or hopeless does not worry them. They distrust, as we have already seen, the conservatism of their elders. Neither does the fact that the pursuit of these ideals is liable or likely to endanger their safety or comfort bear much weight with them; safety for themselves or others is not a motive to put before the adolescent.

They dream of sacrifice and high service, and do not readily analyse it further, but by nature they want to be asked to give, and when asked will give generously. In spite of this idealism they demand a realist approach to immediate problems; their impatience wants to see some ready results from their actions, while the contribution, which these results will make to the total or final end they will leave to others to work out. In forming these ideals, adolescents are much affected by hero-worship, by following the example of men and women whom they admire. Their heroes may change as they grow up, but it is vital that they be given a chance to learn of worthy ones at every stage, for they will follow easily where they cannot at all be driven.

NEED OF SYMPATHY.

Because, then, of the many-sided conflict in his mind, what the adolescent needs most is sympathy. Now sympathy here does not mean sorrow or pity, because in fact the adolescent dreads pity, which is to him a sign of his weakness while he wants people to be interested in him. Neither does it mean that the adolescent should be given licence to act without restraint, or should be set free of all discipline, which is an unworthy claim often made in his behalf, notably by psychologists with Freudian tendencies. On the contrary, the adolescent will accept even rigorous discipline gladly and respect it, if it is properly put before him as something to achieve. Sympathy in this context does not mean, then, either of these. It means that adults who come into close contact with the adolescent must realise that this young person is no longer a child, and that he has now special needs of which the greatest is probably someone in whom he can confide, with whom he can discuss his troubles, and to whom he can reveal his partly formed ambitions.

This means someone whom he can trust absolutely, and who will appreciate his code of conduct or honour, or at least accept it as a discussing point. It does not mean that an older person must pretend to shed his years and act as though he were not of mature mind; such conduct is too obviously insincere, and only repels the young.

It must be remembered too that, because of the emotional instability of the adolescent, this confidant must be always on hand, to listen and give encouragement, for the confiding mood may pass quite quickly, and a similar opportunity may not be given again.

It is often true that young people do not find their parents or near relatives the easiest to confide in, perhaps because they fear that the parent or relatives know much about them, or because they feel ashamed of some of the confidences, which they wish to make.

It may often be, too, that a young person may not be sufficiently sure of what he wants to confide; he may even lack the vocabulary in which to express himself to intimate friends, or he may feel that his confidences or the terms, which he must use to express them, will shock his parents or relatives. In these cases, parents would be unwise in trying to force themselves on their children. Unfortunately, the young sometimes prefer to confide in total strangers who seem to be sympathetic to their views, and their inexperience can lead them to choose unsuitable confidants. There is danger in this for both sexes. The danger, of course, is more obvious in the case of girls, who are sometimes led in this way through innocence and inexperience into situations, which bear all the external marks of complete indifference to their parents and even of personal badness. Allowance must be made for this tendency, however, and precautions taken against it. It is increased by all those who wish to win over the young by pandering to their whims, and preach a false doctrine to them of the importance of being emancipated from home ties.

PART 2.

The characteristics, which have been under discussion so far, are features of the adolescent everywhere; they are independent of changing conditions of time and place. Certain factors in the present world, however, create a special problem by aggravating the natural difficulties inherent in adolescence, and by seeming to change their nature so that they look like completely new difficulties. These must get special consideration. Sometimes they are consciously used to achieve results by interested parties. Some of these factors may have existed in older days, but the strong sense of family discipline and attachment, which was normal then, helped to counteract their evil effects. At times, this discipline may have caused other problems, and been responsible for suffering, but it was certainly not an unmixed evil, and the suffering it caused, is, I think, often exaggerated in the telling of it.

THE ADOLESCENT AND MATERIALISM.

The conditions in the present world to which I refer are the result of certain social developments, which profoundly affect contemporary youth. First among these is the rank materialism of the time, the inclination, I mean, to evaluate everything by what it will be worth to its possessor in money or pleasure. There is an increasing tendency to look on the acquisition of riches as all that matters for an individual or a nation, and to discount even the noblest in life if it does not contribute to its owner’s spending power. The question ‘What is it worth?’ is heard too often. This definitely causes doubt and distress in the mind of the adolescent, who is repelled by it, and rightly sees it as an unworthy approach. Side by side with this development, and closely allied to it in origin, is the rejection of clear fixed standards of judgement between good and bad, and the acceptance instead of a variable criterion by which it is decided that a thing is good or bad according as it helps a person to get on in life or not. The old, definite unchanging standards of morality are being made light of or rejected. In such a world, the young find it difficult to judge what is right or even to be convinced that there is a distinction between right and wrong. Religion too is being put aside, and the rights of its spokesmen are questioned, while the end of man is being sought in passing pleasure.

It is really a strange poetic justice that while all this is supposed to be for his emancipation, it makes the adolescent feel more and more that he is being cheated. He is being deprived of an object for

that idealism which he craves. He is being deprived of solid grounds for judging what is right for him to do such as a dogmatically-based religion gives. And so we find that even in countries where church going has long ceased to be popular, the young are now returning to it. Extreme philosophies, too, find fanatical adherents among soul-starved adolescents, as they seek for some creed, which will give meaning to their lives: witness their adherence to communism.

Causes, which from the start are obviously hopeless, are taken up by them, and sometimes even, it would seem, for the very reason that they are hopeless, in a sort of mystic self-immolation for the selfishness of society. That this is no mere rhetorical phrase anyone who reads the signs of the day, even here in Ireland, will see. And if we for our part appear by word or deed to distort religion into some selfish thing to achieve our own salvation merely, oblivious of the salvation of others, or if we use it to buttress and preserve a status quo which we have found profitable or comfortable, and if we neglect to demand sacrifice and even the Cross from ourselves and our youth for our religion and our ideals, we must not be surprised if we find them chasing such will-o'-the-wisps.

THE ADOLESCENT AND SOCIALISM.

Next I put the welfare state, or rather the idea of socialism from which it springs, as unfair to the present-day adolescent, although at first sight it would seem particularly advantageous to him. First of all, it is based on comfort and security, which do not in any way appeal to the adventurous and idealistic temper of the adolescent. Put simply it means that the person is to be regarded as no more than a part of the crowd, and so it should be accepted as the duty of the crowd, through its instrument the state, to provide for his material needs in every way.

As far as the adolescent is concerned, it will be clear that such gratuitous provision for him confirms him in his natural reluctance to undertake new works. There is little need to do so now. From the same source comes lack of respect for personal responsibility and for foresight and self-sacrifice. Work does not get the respect it formerly got, and saving or economy is not encouraged. Thus, the older notions of pride and independence are discouraged. Training for a situation or profession affords little joy: education is said to be a waste of time – unless some higher or more personal motive is put before him.

If things like houses, luxuries, and the varieties of foods available are accepted as a measure of progress, and they must be, the standard of living has risen enormously in a generation. All this is taken by the younger generation as an essential part of life, something to which they have a right, without which life would be unthinkable. The moralising of the older generation on the hardships it endured and overcame to reach this desirable state, as compared with the self-gratification of their children does not impress modern youth. The fact that hardships were endured in the past is looked upon by the adolescent as proving nothing more than the ineffectiveness of the people who endured them for so long. He forgets that, it was by sacrifice that the older generation procured many of the benefits, which the young now enjoy, and they have therefore a right to expect gratitude for them. Extreme socialism, however, does not recognise gratitude for the past as one of the virtues; it looks to the future and claims to act as if that can be built independently of the past.

So the young are taught not to look on these benefits as something to be grateful for; they are given to understand that they were simply something to which their parents had a right, and showed weakness by not taking long before they did. Thus, there is conflict on the outlook for the future, and difference about the obligations of gratitude for the past, which increases the difficulties of the young. Youth, with its logic and honesty draws unwelcome conclusions from the attitude of easy

complacency adopted by the older generation. The latter may well find this irritating and embarrassing. It may sometimes suspect uneasily however, that youth may after all be right in objecting that progress has not reached its culmination in the material comforts and benefits of which their elders are so proud.

SIGNS OF LACK OF SATISFACTION.

(a) Entertainment. It can be objected that since this idea of the paternal state has not been put into operation in countries such as Ireland, our adolescents cannot be said to be greatly affected by it. This, of course, is true to some extent, but, in so far as it is true, it only makes the problem more difficult. Because of the indoctrination of the present-day adolescent, even in Ireland, by repeated powerful propaganda for what are known as post-war ways of thought, supplemented by the advertising of sales-promoting concerns, who hope to profit from it, our youths have become accustomed to accepting almost without thinking the notion of a society where families are small, benefits are plenty, and selfish recreation, which is to be obtained by lavish spending, is normal.

Elsewhere in Europe, this recreation takes the form of noisy attendance at mammoth professional games-spectacles, cinema, dancing to music provided by professional orchestras, and indulgence in alcohol. In all these forms of entertainment passivity and gregariousness are obvious features, and a lack of personal participation and a shedding of personal responsibility are common characteristics. The use of fast cars has become an essential to recreation, and indicates basic restlessness and tension. Moreover, recreation is thought of as something, which must be separate from one's means of livelihood.

(b) Work. All through Europe at present, there is a clear tendency to profess dissatisfaction with one's work, and hatred for the place in which one works, factors which can easily be made use of by agitators in order to further their subversive plans. It is not difficult to expand this hatred into hatred for the whole employer system and for those who uphold it. It is thought contemptible to find satisfaction or enjoyment in work, apart from the spending money earned at it, and everywhere there is a tendency to seek illusory emancipation by changing situations without apparent reason or by emigration from the locality or even from the country. In all this, it seems as if the individual is as the mercy of his environment. He cannot take the initiative and act for himself, but must allow himself to be carried along by those around him. There are clear signs too that we here in Ireland are being affected by all these things. We are obviously not protected from them by our island position and so we cannot ignore them as if we were to remain immune from harm by them.

But distressing though these changes be in themselves, it is more disturbing to remember that they are really indications of something deeper. The attitude of the modern adolescent to work and play points unmistakably to a lack of personal fulfillment, which amounts to a disease. Lack of personal initiative, and submission to environmental influences, is a form of determinism, which must, if it is logical, deny free will and human liberty. The different items mentioned are no more than separate symptoms, I believe, which leave no doubt about the existence of serious social disease, and if there is to be a cure it must go far deeper than the symptoms, and work on the more fundamental malaise both in the community and in the individual. And the disease is likely to be even more grievous in a community like ours, which is founded on ideas that differ from those out of which such attitudes to life naturally grow. By this, I mean that we do not profess materialism, but we act too often as if we did; the opposition is therefore all the greater, causing greater friction and greater worry, and so is likely to cause a deeper and greater sore in the body politic.

REACTION AGAINST ANONYMITY.

That the adolescent is conscious of the tendency of present-day society, to merge him as an anonymous element in the crowd, and to expect or desire little if any personal activity from him, is made plain from the violence with which he reacts against it at times. This reaction is illustrated by the modern exaggeration of his natural leaning towards ostentatious clothes or conduct. It finds expression first of all in a slavish readiness to follow the newest fashions in dress and taste and behaviour, for the sole reason that they are new, and at the same time to adopt consciously aggressive elaborations of these fashions just because they are completely at variance with accepted conventions. The fashion crazes of the moment are a striding example of this.

THE GANG MEMBER.

The gang member, bizarre in dress and violent in conduct, cowardly as an individual and depending for moral and physical support on his gang, consciously seeking unconventionality and yet pathetically similar to others of his type in almost every way, is to be seen shuffling through the working classes all over Europe at present. It would be a very grave mistake to dismiss him lightly as just a freak development, which will pass and be forgotten, to suggest that he is a product of the films and so on.

He is much more than this and demands careful examination both in himself and in what he stands for. He will not be confined for long to the working classes merely, but will find his counterpart – with perhaps slight changes in externals – in the other classes, if he has not already done so. Unfortunately, he appears to be a very real symptom of social disease resulting from soul starvation.

Even though he is not fully aware of it, the unworthy contradictory attempts at herding and excessive individualism which he displays, clearly betray his resentment against want of opportunity to develop a satisfying personality, which would serve as a safety valve for his gathering energy, and at the same time would provide the society to which he belongs with much power for good. He does what he does because no one shows him that he is wanted to do better; no one hires him to till his own corner of the vineyard. His want is certainly the fault of society, and the faults of society we must not forget are brought about by the individuals who compose it, rather than by the leaders who claim to direct it. The flaunting excesses we see so often in modern youth are caused by, even if they are not excused by, the lack of scope in worth-while tasks provided for him, by the want of proper ideals and the means to achieve them. Every adolescent knows that the prayer ‘give us this day our daily bread’ should not be a mere request that is limited to a job in a factory, however well paid, for the soul and the mind need sustenance as much as the body. His excesses may be caused too, by his realization that the limited world we are so proudly preparing to hand on to him is not the perfect place we sometimes so complacently say it is.

CYNICISM TOWARDS SERVICE.

Allied to this mood of rebelliousness, and deriving from the same source, is the attitude of apparent cynicism towards social and democratic obligations, which is also to be observed in the modern adolescent all through Europe, particularly towards the later stages of his development. Impatience with their elders has always been a characteristic of youth. Indifference and lack of responsibility can be expected at all times from the young, but a more sinister element appears to have entered now. On the surface, this attitude looks like a form of arrogance, which is unreasonable and objectionable, but a closer examination will reveal that it also contains much disappointment. It shows itself in positive refusal to participate in civic responsibility, and an attempt to justify this by

dismissing all who do take part in it as unworthy and dishonest in their intentions, or at least as not being completely altruistic in their motives. Anyone who takes part in communal activities, such as local government or leadership, does so, they allege, for reasons of personal advancement alone. They allow of no exceptions, for ‘They are all the same!’ they cry. The young declare loftily that they are superior to this self-seeking, and want nothing to do with it.

They stand glumly aloof, and as a result, we find statesmen everywhere regretting the fewness of young men or women who are prepared to step forward to take a practical interest in democratic affairs, and lamenting that the younger generation appear to have lost respect for the democratic ideal. This cynicism is so contrary to the unselfish optimism, idealism, and sense of service, which is normal to adolescents, that it cannot be genuine. Their spirited discussion amongst themselves, and their readiness to speak and write of international affairs, and to examine the solutions arrived at in other countries, reveal their real longings, and show that nonparticipation at home is mostly a pose on their part.

This pose of the adolescent is adopted for several reasons. It is a defence mechanism against his natural lack of sureness and self-reliance, which needs more tactful handling than it gets. It is a face-saving attempt to salve his injured pride, and his disappointment at not being given the scope he really longs for, at not perhaps receiving the sympathetic welcome he expects, when he does venture into tentative participation. It is very similar to the aggressiveness or ostentatious churlishness sometimes shown in his private life. Unfortunately, the attitude of adults may be ultimately responsible for this assumed indifference or cynicism, though not being psychologists, the failure of the old to recognise the eagerness concealed behind the attitude of the young is understandable. And by continually repeating that his non-cooperation is founded upon reason, the adolescent succeeds in convincing himself and making his attitude permanent, as well as making it a matter of prestige to maintain it.

The regrettable tendency among modern writers and historians to uncover and magnify the hidden faults and human weaknesses of historical figures in whom the young have been taught to believe, appears to give scientific support to their attitude of cynicism. The unseemly recriminations of politicians who do not hesitate to impute the lowest motives to their opponents, add to the trouble. Confirmation for his cynicism is also provided by reading of the selfish, base, unworthy motives, which modern writing so often attributes to the sexes and their relations with one another. Young people are disappointed and hurt when they see their ideals shattered. They cannot be blamed if they take excessive precautions lest it happen again.

If selfishness is paraded before the eyes of youth as a mark of all who are in high places it is not to be wondered at that they see it and deliberately keep away.

FANTASY INSTEAD OF SERVICE

Naturally young people must find outlets somewhere for their energy; their desire for activity must find a chance to express itself. We have seen one way in which this is provided for, namely, resentful excessive activity. An easier way and one that meets less opposition is by entering a dream world. This has always been a means of escape, but the gates have been thrown open to the adolescent in the modern world by means of the cinema and other media. Day-dreaming or fantasy is a natural sedative for the young. The film producers are aware of this and like the publishers of adolescent magazines, they provide it in abundance. They have learned what these young people

want. They give it to them to such an extent that it develops its own need, which, like the need for narcotics soon ceases to be natural.

CINEMA and MEDIA.

It is true that a little day-dreaming is normally good for the adolescent. Through it, a vicarious form of exciting activity by identification with a hero or heroine is made possible, and the young person is afforded a useful safety valve thereby, provided that the character temporarily assumed is not an immoral one. There is no doubt, however, that when it assumes the proportions which it may under the influence of the particularly glamourized and luscious form of cinema to which the modern adolescent has become accustomed, daydreaming or fantasy can be harmful, apart from all considerations of morality in the strict sense. Such a form of cinema hinders the growth of a vigorous personality, which is prepared to find its satisfaction by wrestling successfully with everyday normal problems. When it accustoms the adolescent to evade his responsibilities by having recourse to frequent fantasy of this kind, it develops a flabby, fibreless character, which will have no practice in resisting the environment in which he will live, and thus will allow himself to be formed and moulded unduly by circumstances. So it contributes largely to the formation of a determinist attitude to life.

In this regard, apart altogether from strictly religious considerations, cinema, which is accepted in a languorous frame of mind, can be looked upon as anti-social, just as the more sensuous and commercialised types of dancing or indulgence in alcohol by the young can be. They all weaken the tough fibre, which is part of character. It is unfortunate for the modern world that the totalitarian dictators realized this danger quite early. They took pains to avert it by providing their adolescents with more virile and psychologically more congenial outlets for their energy, even though many of these were morally and socially reprehensible, and even though the personality they wished to develop went to extremes of hardness and insensitivity. But by their action, and by reaping such rich harvests from it for the totalitarianism they supported, they gave the impression that it must be antidemocratic, and therefore wrong, to oppose these forms of fibre-sapping recreation.

THE ADOLESCENT A REAL PERSON.

At this point, it is well to remind ourselves that there is really no such thing as the average adolescent. By that, I mean that there is really no person who runs completely true to type. A person is a composite of body and soul, and souls cannot be typed. Consequently, every present-day adolescent must be studied as an individual and one living in the actual world of today. This means first of all, that he must be studied with that general sympathy and understanding of which I have already spoken. He must be seen in a personal manner and with full consciousness of the problems to be faced by him. Many of these problems were unknown in the past and so the older generation must make a special effort to appreciate them properly. As well as that, it must be accepted that the adolescent of the present has immense capacities for good, and in this regard is no way inferior to any who preceded him. But a knowledge of the traits which characterise adolescence in general is a help to understanding the individual, if only to assure bewildered parents that this strangely developing un-cooperative young person, who was lately a pleasant docile child, is not some unworthy changeling thrust on them. So inconsistent and inexplicable does his conduct seem, that such a thought must come to them at times!

It is also well to remind ourselves that the normal person’s impressions are still soundly based in spite of all that is written on the problems, frustrations and unhappiness of adolescence.

The individual adolescent may therefore be expected to be a reasonably happy, optimistic, and satisfied person, and such problems as cause him worry arise from many-sided complex sources and are not, as is sometimes suggested, always or solely the result of parental failure.

HELP FOR THE ADOLESCENT IDEALS.

Now how are the psychological needs of the adolescent, and the peculiar difficulties that spring from modern life, to be met? Obviously, they must be made use of where possible, as difficulties become valuable assets when they provoke corresponding effort. Apart from his need of sympathy the greatest single need of the adolescent, is probably the provision of worthy ideals. These must be made readily available to him. We have them all around us, if we look for them in life, in history, and in religion above all. It is our duty to know these, and to bring them to the notice of the adolescent. But continuous nagging and preaching at him is of no use. Neither is repeated contrasting of his failures with the achievements of older people a help. The recommendation of worth while books, for example, may help, or drawing attention to significant news items, if it is skilfully done, but serious interested discussion on adult topics will play a bigger part.

Then, too, it is essential to provide an atmosphere where young ideals can be not merely brought to light, but gloried in and openly discussed. It is pitiable to see an adolescent driven back into that frustrating shyness and self-consciousness so easy for him, by being treated as immature just because he speaks of ideals, and so he must be able to find encouragement for his aims and his attempts, even though a tactful and sympathetic redirection of them will occasionally be necessary. The young person must feel that there is someone who thinks that his viewpoint is worth considering.

TRUST.

Next comes an attitude of practical trust towards adolescents. If we are to meet their needs, we must show them that we not merely admire their high motives, but that we believe they are capable of carrying out certain tasks, and consequently we must be ready to entrust these tasks gladly to them. At home, at school, in church, working with us in a common enterprise, the young must be accepted as junior partners, who will one day take over from us completely. They must, therefore, be entrusted with a fair share of the work, and, as far as possible, be allowed to do it in their own way, and shown that they are expected as a matter of course to do it well. I think too, that greater generosity is needed on our part in the beginning so that if our adolescents make mistakes, we will take a major share of the blame; and if they do well in partnership with us, we will give them all the praise. The modern world tends to make them ciphers, which attain a significance only when a leader has been placed arbitrarily before them by some invisible moving hand.

We must make them persons, each one of whom is valuable in himself, and infinitely valuable when he unites himself voluntarily, as he may, to God, and through God with his brothers. The experience of all groups working for and through youth stresses the importance of this. Witness the success of the YCW (Young Christian Workers) movement or the Legion of Mary. Apart from the help of God’s grace, their obvious success with youth is to be found in showing young people their real value as persons. On a lower plane, various other bodies recognise this and make use of it, too. By the terms they employ and the actions and excitement they promise, they enable young men and women to identify themselves with heroes who have shown themselves real persons in the recent past, and thus they raise these young persons’ self-esteem, and win ready, grateful allegiance from them. The underground and resistance armies fighting against aggression are studied and copied in

many lands for method and approach, by leaders who know what adolescents want. The heroes of occupied Europe or the child-fighters of Hungary are held up as examples in conditions, which bear little resemblance to the places where these carried out their exploits. Irish people must be aware of this at present.

EDUCATION TO SUIT MODERN NEEDS.

We have considered that one of the major factors in the mental attitude of the adolescent at the present day is a feeling of personal inadequacy. This must be remedied, and to remedy it is the task of education. Both in content and in method education must be related to actual modern conditions.

A realignment is generally sufficient in this regard. The example of the lovely 3R's ("Reading, 'Riting and 'Rithmatic") will illustrate what is meant by this. These must be taught in elementary schools, now as always. But the growing use of the spoken word in preference to the written word as a means of communication with others, through radio, telephone and recording apparatus, requires that at least as much consideration must now be given to clear speech as was formerly given to clear writing, while the social acceptance of the typewriter makes the old copperplate handwriting less necessary. This is a real change, which we scarcely notice. Similar changes are demanded at every level. We in Ireland must examine our system to see what changes are required by our separation from an industrial empire, of which we were a part when our educational system was originally devised. Even while we concentrate on the literary type of education, which we feel we need, we may be wrong in excluding all training in crafts.

Perhaps our young people would benefit from early introduction to handicrafts, and feel better prepared to live in the present day world.

This does not mean that we must reject all that is old in education, and confine our attention to the strictly functional or utilitarian for that would defeat even its own purpose. The adolescent will always need the deliberate contemplation of greatness, which is to be found in a broad cultural and religious training, which will explain and elevate his life. He must also be encouraged to solve his own problems of work and leisure, and to do so not in a self-centred manner, but against the background of national and world problems. He must be taught to consider the obligations of others, if he in his turn is to make a full, even though unconscious, contribution to solving wider problems through his little efforts. The obvious interest of the present day adolescent in international affairs should make this a simple task.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE WITH CONFIDENCE.

This education must always be forward-looking while making all due allowance for indebtedness to the past. Here in Ireland at present it is probably true that we are not giving our young people sufficient inspiring confidence in their ability to direct the future, and so they tend to relive the past for its glories; they try to recapture the past which is foolish because impossible. In stressing the difficulties ahead of the nation, I fear that we do not always present these properly in the form of the challenge, which our young people need to spark off their idealism, ingenuity and industry, and their spirit of self-sacrifice. Effort is only evoked by seeing a problem and knowing at the same time that it can be solved. Far too often in our appeals for effort, we unintentionally speak as if the position here were 'hopeless', and so our young people tend to adopt desperate remedies, or go in search of places where opportunities are offered which are more encouraging. Or we give the impression that since we have not abundant material resources, we are rich in nothing. We are not worthy of our youth if we do not help them overcome their natural reluctance to act with reason

under observation, or if we discourage their already damped enthusiasm by a complacent ‘I told you so’ attitude, when their schemes are only partially successful.

Living for a Christian Ireland, which these young people themselves can form, must be given the same glamour at the present day as dying for it received when that was necessary. This is possible, if we give them a sense of national responsibility, and show them how to prepare themselves to contribute their share in industriousness and acquired skill. We must also initiate for them that contagious thrill of excitement, that feeling of preparation for big things to be accomplished by their united efforts, the assurance that it is a good time for a young person to be alive, which one senses in certain inspiring educational environments.

One is aware of that feeling wherever a nation is drawn together to wrestle with difficulties, and is proud of the struggle it is making, glad even at the very thought of the difficulties before it, because they call for effort, and incidentally prove the worth of the fighter. You can feel it quite palpably in many periods of Irish history. One such period was when [Blessed John Henry] Newman was planning his dream university and leading the people to set it up on the ruins of the famine. One senses it today in countries that are gaining the unwilling inch against the legacy of hardships left them by the disasters of the war. In quite different surroundings the same exhilarating atmosphere is felt, where boys and girls are preparing themselves to go out on the mission fields, conscious of the difficulties ahead, but confident nevertheless. One meets it again in the attitude of quiet determination and trust in one another, which marks the struggles of families to overcome apparently insuperable obstacles.

I fear that one does not get the same bracing air at present in our nation as a whole. Perhaps we are tired as a nation, after our centuries of struggle against political difficulties, and need some time to recover, before we are refreshed enough to resume the struggle against economic and cultural difficulties. The danger is that, as we wait, our adolescents, who are naturally prone to suspect such weariness, may grow despondent and impatient.

EDUCATION THAT IS OUR OWN.

The modern adolescent needs to be given the best available educational facilities, facilities that are in keeping with present conditions and future needs. This does not of necessity mean more educational facilities. We must be careful about this. Quantity or variety is not the answer to our question. The mere provision of schooling will solve little. Neither will longer compulsory attendance at school, by itself, solve all our problems automatically. That is too easy, too much like passing a difficulty, which is ours, over to someone else. The herding of unwilling adolescents into schools, and deluding ourselves that we have thereby done our part, could produce by-products just as harmful for many of them, as it has done in places in America, and is said to be doing to some extent in England at present. I do not wish to be taken now as opposed in principle to longer school attendance, or to the raising of the school-leaving age. There are many convincing arguments in its favour. I am merely protesting that this easy proposal cannot be a solution, if it absolves the normal person from the necessity of making his own effort, however small it be. Neither will we solve our problems by borrowing solutions that have been found effective in other countries. We can learn from these, and we should, but eventually we can only reach our goal by our own means of travel. It may well be that, when fully worked out, these will turn out to be like those found useful elsewhere, and to have similarities, perhaps to English, Scandinavian or Italian methods, but they will only serve our needs in so far as they are our own discoveries.

We must each of us play his part, and make his contribution of work, example and sacrifice, and if we do nothing else, we shall give practical proof thereby that we are thinking helpful persons and not just ciphers. We can show that we are aware of, and ready to depend on, the natural goodness of our adolescents, who will thereby be encouraged to respond by giving their utmost in service and generosity.

CONCLUSION.

Christ gave the government of his church to a senior man among his disciples, to Saint Peter; he gave the care of his mother to the adolescent among them, to Saint John.

Saint John showed many of the traits of the adolescent. He wanted to sit at the right hand of the Messiah ruling the world. He would have called down fire from heaven on those who slighted his Master. He went into the dangers of the trial room, and he stood loyally and defiantly in the midst of the grim angry mob at the foot of the Cross. He accepted the commission to look after Our Lady without embarrassment, and without thought that she perhaps was better equipped to look after him. We can be sure that as these two walked down from Calvary supporting each other, he mingled tears of disappointment and frustration with his anger, and tenderness for her with resolution to stay with her as long as she needed him. No one but a young man would have kept faith in the future then. In the same spirit of love and faith and trust, our adolescents are a sure guarantee that hope of success in the future should not wane.

THE AUTHOR.

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