

(Address given by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at the National Catholic Educational Association Convention, Chicago, Illinois, April 14, 1982)

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND EDUCATION

One should begin, I think, by admitting that the Catholic Church could very well achieve its mission in this world, to spread the Kingdom of God, through the proclamation of the Word and the conferring of the Sacraments, without engaging in formal or organized education at all on any level. I say formal education because the proclamation of the good news is itself a kind of educational activity, but it certainly has and can take place without the founding of schools and universities. Why then has the Church founded them?

One could note that in many parts of the world, formal education, at least on the highest level of university education, which I know best, has not been a part of the Church's apostolate. While the Church is rightly called the Mother of Universities, beginning with her founding of the University of Paris in 1205, there are many vast areas of the world where there are very few or no Catholic universities. In Europe, where universities began, all the early ones were Catholic -- Paris, Bologna, Salamanca, Prague, Cracow, Coimbra, Oxford, Cambridge, and so many more. In that birthplace of Catholic universities, there are only a handful left today, most of them founded or recreated in the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries. Africa, the Near East, all of the Iron

Certain countries, except Poland, India, the vast Pacific, Australia and New Zealand, have no Catholic universities at all.

Most of the few others that do exist in the Orient or in Latin America were founded recently. More than half of all the students in Catholic universities and colleges are in the United States and Canada.

One might conclude from this brief worldwide survey that while the Church at first, in the Thirteenth century and then somewhat lately in this century, became interested in the establishment of Catholic higher learning in general throughout the world, it has ^{throughout most of its history} made do without universities, or, in fact, with very few new Catholic universities. I do not judge yet whether or not this is a good development, but simply observe the fact. Whether or not the Church would be better off with a different situation is left for further discussion.

As to elementary and secondary education, I confess to lesser expertise, knowledge, and experience. I have seen practically all of the world, and to a greater or lesser degree, the Roman Catholic Church exists practically everywhere -- with large exceptions like Russia and China -- and almost everywhere I have found Catholic education in some form, more or less, coming out of the American or Canadian experience through missionaries. I must say that there are almost always fewer rather than more schools than we have here. Latin countries in Europe and Latin America tend to have elementary or secondary

Catholic education, mainly for the sons and daughters of the elite or rich few. Most mission countries seem to see schools as an important part of their access to students and their parents. But, in general, such schools seem, in comparison to our country, to be few and far between. In many cases, as already noted, these schools are the creation of American Catholic missionaries, repeating an experience that they saw work well at home. As the number of American and European missionaries decrease, I suspect the schools will, too.

Where does this leave us in our discussion of the Catholic Church and education? If we consider the historical and existential situation, I would conclude that it leaves us with several generalizations:

1. Education has been a congenial and fruitful activity of the Catholic Church whenever and wherever possible, especially in missionary countries.

2. Judging from the efforts to maintain an educational effort on many different levels in many parts of the world, education was considered a valuable adjunct to the Church's essential apostolic mission, but it has, for a variety of reasons, never been a universally effective or absolutely widespread Church activity, although on the lower levels, it has strangely flourished more in missionary lands than in the great centers of Catholic population, America being an exception of sorts.

3. The Church, as Church, has not placed education in the forefront of its apostolate, although religious orders have always done so in the name of the Church. This is a rather curious observation that deserves further development. In America, bishops and pastors favored Catholic elementary and secondary education for their immigrant Church, but the creation of the system depended upon the efforts of men and women religious. In Catholic higher education, religious founded, financed, and manned most colleges and universities.

4. Very few educators have been declared saints by the Church which may or may not say something about the Church's estimation of the hundreds of thousands of men and women religious whose lives were totally spent in the service of Catholic young people on all levels of Catholic education. One might counter that there are very few canonized married saints, too.

5. Despite these factual observations, it may be possible to establish a stronger case, at least in theory, regarding the over-all importance of the apostolate of education to the establishment of the Kingdom. After 2000 years, it may be a trifle late to make this case. Nevertheless, I shall try.

To begin to construct a modern theory, one must look at the world and the Church as it is today. We live in a world of more than four billion people, of whom about a fifth, or 750 million, are Catholic Christians. If one were to add other non-Catholic Christians, the number would be closer to a fourth,

or more than a billion Christians. The other three billion are either Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, or unattached religiously. Being a Christian or not is, beyond baptism, a matter of faith, of accepting the good news of Christ, Our Lord. This faith is not professed in a vacuum, but is most deeply an essential part of general culture, of one's world view, one's notion of God and humanity, a perception of life as eternal, as well as temporal, a set of values that give meaning to all we are and all we do. Most of us can trace our own religious and cultural allegiance to that of our family, but, in larger measure, it has been weakened or strengthened by our education.

If I might speak for myself -- and each of you must do likewise -- I count myself fortunate to have been born in a believing and practicing Christian family. However, beyond this blessing, I spent twenty-three years in Catholic schools, here and in Europe. These years gave me a cultural introduction into vast areas of human knowledge, literature, language, history, social and physical science and mathematics, philosophy, and theology. My faith, growing during all of those years, grew deep roots in the vast expanse of human knowledge and culture which I studied under Catholic auspices. In addition, this body of knowledge was buttressed by the daily experience of prayer and service, of living the faith and growing in the conviction that faith cast a special light on all areas of human knowing and experience, inspiring love and grounding hope.

All of this, one must designate as education in the broadest Christian perspective. Obviously, many dedicated people, sisters, priests, brothers, and lay people by their teaching and example, contributed their part to whatever I am today, as a result of that education. I realize that it would be unrealistic to imagine that all Christians should have a similar experience, but even if only a relatively few do, the result is bound to have repercussions far beyond the individuals involved. The waves of personal influence flow ever outward and one hopes that the Kingdom of God is ever enlarged in greater measure. One thing is certain: without such formal education, or whatever informal substitute is available, there is little enlargement of the faith, little spreading of the Kingdom, little formation of Christian leaders.

In olden days, we used to quote the scholastic adage: *Nemo dat quod non habet* -- no one gives what he or she does not have -- and in the matter of faith, the full having must involve much more than the simple message of the Gospel -- somehow it must encompass one's culture and world view, one's values and visions for humanity, one's hopes and dreams for the future. It is precisely in transmitting all of this, in all that one is and does, that one transmits the faith, or at least the living vision of what a believing, practicing Christian is and does. In the words of Cardinal Suhard, this is the "apostolate of presence" and all of this is given to one by a Christian education, more or less full and complete.

It does not happen in a day or a year. It can happen fully or in part. It supposes as well the grace that comes from sacrament,

as well as inspiration from the Word. It is a kind of totality that simply cannot exist, even partially, without education, even though that may be exceedingly simple, as, for example, from the lives of one's parents, family, or friends.

Formal education is something else and, without it, all of this is unlikely to happen at all. One thinks of the vast number of illiterate Christians who are bedeviled by superstition, ignorant of the Christian creed, no more moral than most pagans, almost never part of a liturgical community. This is why I think that one may propose a simple statement that is difficult to deny: without formal or informal Christian education, it is highly unlikely that sufficient people will be formed in the manner that will insure the continual growth and ^{expansion} ~~expression~~ of the Kingdom of God for which the Church ultimately exists.

It was precisely because many of our early American pastors deeply believed this that the children, like myself, of this immigrant Church could be educated from kindergarten to Ph.D. in Catholic educational institutions. My pastor, Father George Mahon of Most Holy Rosary Parish in Syracuse, New York, built an elementary and secondary educational institution before he built a church. For years, we worshipped in the school auditorium and gym. That did not concern him because during the first thirty years of the parish, mainly without a finished church at all, he produced thirty-six priests and twenty-eight ~~women~~ ^{women} religious, plus an enormous number

of very Christian families. When one compares that experience with most Latin American countries, for example, the contrast is striking. We produce more priests and religious annually -- even at the current depressed rate -- than all of the more than twenty Latin American countries together. In practically none of them are half of the priests native to the country, despite the fact that they have been practically all Catholic countries, whereas we are a minority here, one-fourth of the total population. A smaller Catholic country, Poland, -- in the Communist embrace -- also produces more priests annually than all of Latin America.

One risks vast dangers of oversimplification in comparisons like this, but if one single factor could be said to account mainly for the difference, it would have to be the creation of a Catholic educational system, by poor people, mainly for poor people, to educate at its best moment in the United States, more than six million Catholic children, while there was an almost total absence of such a Catholic education system there. We also had to cope, in the beginning, with multiple languages and cultures here, a problem they did not have, and with an inimical majority of non-Catholics all around us -- another non-existing problem in Latin America.

I realize that I may suddenly become very unpopular in making such a comparison, but my purpose is not to criticize Latin America, but to demonstrate the effect on the Church of the presence or absence of a Catholic educational system.

For me, it is curious that despite the startling success of such a system in our country, somehow a decade or two ago, we began to lose heart, and the system that had been built with such care and sacrifice, mainly by the efforts and generosity of poor people, was often abandoned by them when they became more affluent.

Abel Green, the famous former Editor of Variety, the show biz magazine, used to say "Don't try to rewrite a hit." We did not try to rewrite our hit of Catholic education, we just walked away from it. Even my school at Most Holy Rosary has now been closed. Why? The French would call it a crisis of nerve.

You have all heard the alleged reasons, and most of you know far more than I about the current state of elementary and secondary Catholic education.

The numbers have shrunk by at least a third. Many schools that could have been the one way out for ghetto children, even though not Catholic children, have been cruelly closed. One of our greatest apostolic instrumentalities has been blunted and abandoned -- even though the building was there, the need was there, the financing was available if one were willing to seek it, the teachers could be attracted, even though most would have been lay rather than religious -- and still they closed one of the best gates to heaven that has yet been devised by the Church. All I can say is: What a shame! May we yet recover.

Having said this, may I also pay tribute to the Catholic ghetto schools that still exist, and still give ghetto children and parents their one viable option for a good education in an educational desert.

Here in Chicago, for example, the Church is spending many millions of dollars for the education of non-Catholic minority children. There are similar examples in Detroit and New York. One imagines what would happen if we were to do likewise, on a broader scale, all across the country.

I would now like to get back on more familiar ground -- that of Catholic higher education. We have, by and large, managed to survive thus far, although our largest challenges may still be ahead of us.

I must admit that we did some fine tuning at strategic moments. I will admit to all of you that Notre Dame would be in precarious straits today if we had not relinquished the control of our religious Congregation in 1967 and placed the University under lay control. We also became (at long last) coeducational in 1972, and that has been a special blessing for a school named after a Lady.

We also made an act of faith in our Catholic parents and families, believing that they wanted strong Catholic higher education so much for their sons and daughters that they would be willing to contribute the enormous sums of money that this requires. In our case, this has meant, in the past twenty years, gifts totaling over a quarter of a billion dollars. It has also meant hard work. One really does have to shake the tree, justify the generous gift, make the case, but it can be done if one really believes that the effort is worthwhile. And I do believe this, and so do my colleagues.

Money alone will not do it. We are more than hucksters. There must be the vision of the Church in the modern world. How much it is needed! How much there is to be done if the faith is to enrich life in our times. How great and fulfilling a task it is to form mature Christians who will indeed be bright lights in the all encompassing darkness. Not only does the Kingdom of God need them, the world desperately needs them.

I am amazed at how greatly talented are the thousands of students that fill our colleges and universities today. We Catholics have achieved economic affluence beyond almost all of our former persecutors. But beyond that, we must transcend what affluence has meant for so many other American religious and ethnic groups whose affluence has neutered them. We must use our affluence, our new political power, our presence almost everywhere, to serve our Church and our country and our world.

This is the lesson that I find our students today are ready and willing to learn. About a third of our student body are helping, for several hours each week, the less fortunate of this world -- the aged and infirm, the handicapped, the minority high school drop-outs, the Mongoloids, the marginal people on the fringe of our society and so often on the fringe of most of our thoughts and concerns.

Service in itself is a school that makes our students alert, conscious of the problems in our surrounding neighborhood during the school year and all over the world during vacations, alert to the fact that the world today is full of injustices that need righting, full of unfortunate people who need caring, full of challenges to our students' newly-found competence to change the world from what it is into what it ought to be.

Students today are ready to confront racism, to lobby against the growing threat of nuclear destruction, to make some

commitment to what is needed to bring food to the hungry -- and even more to give the hungry the ability to grow their own food; to instruct the ignorant and the illiterates; to construct housing for more who are homeless; to welcome the alien in the land, in the words of Isaiah; to love generously as a Christian should, even those most unlovable; to give one's life to Christ and to His Kingdom in priesthood and religious life; and as deeply committed Christians, to found great Christian families, to be faithful, prayerful, and a symbol of hope.

All of this is admittedly an activist agenda for education and for the Church, but I do not think that the individual Christian vision today will have adequate depth or breadth or staying power unless it is inspired by a Christian sense of history and literature, by a cutting edge of Christian theology and philosophy, by some sense of the mystery of both the physical and spiritual world that surrounds us, and an abiding awe in the face of the ongoing creation which we share by faith and word and sacrament. Above all, activists must pray.

All of this is the legitimate role of Catholic education in and for and by the Church and its working members. Should education have a leading role in the life of the Church today? Should those of us so engaged be confident and hopeful and joyful in our efforts? Will the world itself be better too -- even that part of the world that is still largely secular and unbelieving? If we cannot answer all of these questions with a resounding, affirmative, confident

"Yes," then I have not really communicated to you what is in my mind and in my heart today.

I would like to make one final point. Catholic education in the past has largely been the work of men and women religious. In twelve years of Catholic elementary and secondary education, I had one lay teacher. That day has passed, for a variety of reasons.

If Catholic education, on all levels, is to grow and prosper today, it will be largely a work of the Catholic laity. This is true of many other Catholic endeavors, including the parish and all of its many activities. I do not lament the fact. Years ago, in fact forty years ago, I wrote my doctoral thesis in theology on the place of the laity in the Church, and on the theological basis of the lay apostolate.

I was told by my mentors at that time that this was an unimportant subject, but it has proven to be extremely important today. The People of God, as an image and a reality of the Church, has come into its own. No one need justify today that if we are to do what the Church must do in every age, in our age, it will, in great measure, especially in education, be a work of a committed and dedicated Catholic laity, men and women. I welcome this and, as a religious priest, I rejoice at the collaboration that strengthens and assures the success of all of our educational dreams. I do believe that in the years ahead, we will increasingly come to understand the importance of education in the Church's worldwide

apostolic mission and that dedicated Catholic laymen and laywomen will be in the vanguard of making the promise of education for the Kingdom become a new and exciting reality.

I deeply believe that whatever history tells us of the past experience of the Church and education, the present challenge is loud and clear: the Church desperately needs all of you and your enlightened efforts today if the Kingdom of God is to be more present in our day.