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# The Catholic Point of View\*

BY

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SOME years ago I had the honor of going to the State University at Bloomington Indiana, to give a chapel talk to the students. It was for me a pleasant visit, but it had quite passed out of my mind when last spring—some six months after I had been called to the presidency of Notre Dame—I received a letter from Doctor Kinnaman, then Chairman of your executive committee. The Doctor was evidently unaware that my work had been changed, and his letter was addressed in an impersonal way to the president of Notre Dame. It informed me that a number of very charming ladies and gentlemen were to foregather in this town on this day to discuss matters of interest to school teachers. The Doctor said that a statement of the Catholic viewpoint regarding the public schools would be very acceptable if presented by a peaceful man who could be trusted not to set the house afire by his rhetoric. And he went on to say that some time before a rather nice person had gone down from Notre Dame into the hill country where the State University is and had stated the Catholic position about the bible in such a way that while many present did not agree with his views they all felt that no harm had been done and that the spirit of moderation with which Doctor Kinnaman was good enough to credit the speaker had rather impressed him. “Now, if we could

\* This address was delivered at the fifty-third annual session of the Indiana State Teachers' Association, held at Indianapolis. All the speakers were limited to twenty minutes; hence the fragmentary character of the treatment of this great theme.

have this man come to us to state the Catholic viewpoint regarding the public schools, I feel that we would all be pleased and helped." Of course, it was a very subtle compliment and I replied confessing that I was the person to whom he referred, and that I would gladly come and talk to the teachers of Indiana, for I felt that I should be able to say the essential things on the subject he mentioned without giving offense.

I wish to say with the utmost sincerity that I am grateful for the invitation to address you to-day on this subject. It is one of the great signs of modern progress that people no longer feel obliged to hate one another for the love of God. There was a day when a discussion of this subject would inevitably give out more heat than light, but among earnest and cultivated people that day has happily passed. I am grateful, too, for the opportunity of expressing my profound admiration for the ladies and gentlemen who teach in our public schools. I have frequently had occasion to say how cordial is my interest in the noble men and women who are impressing their minds and character on the plastic souls of the children of our country. It must be understood at once that this feeling is very general among the clergy and laity of the Church to which I belong and that whenever criticism of the public schools is offered at all it is offered solely as criticism of the theory on which the public school is based and has no reference whatever to the officials or teachers connected with the schools. This much being premised, we may now look into the historical development of this question.

The public school system was parochial in its origin. The first schools and indeed all the schools until a comparatively recent date were denominational in character. In most of the state constitutions it is distinctly enunciated that the object of schools established at public

expense is to give instruction in *virtue and knowledge*. Accordingly, in these schools prayers were offered, the bible was read, and comments reflecting the teacher's personal opinion on religious matters were offered. I distinctly remember that in the public school which I attended as a small boy this was the case. Then a considerable section of the people began to object to the praying, and that was dropped. The objection soon extended to the teacher's comment upon the reading of the bible, and that passed away. Finally, objection was made to the use of a particular version of the bible, and the upshot was that in most public schools the reading of the bible has been discontinued. The objection at the present time is that through no fault of the teachers but simply as an inherent defect of the system this total absence of religious teaching of any kind is virtually a teaching of irreligion, and that some further change ought to be made in our schools since they have such a large part in the formation of our children at a time when it is most necessary that these children should be under constant religious influence.

Now, it should be quite possible for us to discuss this matter intelligently and freely without either giving or taking offense. The majority of the American people are unmistakably satisfied with the present attitude of the public school system toward religious instruction. Indeed, the majority are so strongly attached to this system that they even consider it unpatriotic in us to venture criticism or suggest change. But there is a large minority, including great numbers of people who are not of my faith, who feel that since they are paying their share of the school taxes, and since they cannot conscientiously avail themselves of the public schools as at present constituted, there ought to be such change introduced into the system as would enable them to

educate their children without having to bear the burden of double taxation. They feel that the majority has no right to be impatient with them when they express criticism, for they feel that as citizens and as taxpayers they have the same interests and the same rights as others either to approve or to disapprove. And this minority makes it very plain that like the majority, it wants schools free, numerous and well equipped with the best teachers, the best methods, and the best apparatus. They ask, "Why not introduce changes into the system if it can be shown that these changes would be for the common good? Did wisdom die with our fathers who a half century ago chrystalized the various heterogenous schools of the country into the present system? Must their enactment which met the needs of their time with fair success stand for our time and for all times?"

Now, ladies and gentlemen, it will not do to think lightly of this position held by a large minority. If you cannot accept the Catholic view, it is at least incumbent upon you to respect its sincerity. I beleve that if there ever was a case in which earnestness and sincerity were shown in dissenting from a popular opinion this is that case. There are a million children in the Catholic parish schools of this country. I believe that \$25 is the general estimate of the cost of educating a child for one year. and, if so, these parochial schools are doing \$25,000,000 worth of work each year. But suppose for the sake of security that we fix the cost of the parish school system at the absurdly low figure of \$15,000,000 a year, and then reflect on what these figures mean. They mean that our people out of their poverty and their faith have in obedience to a conscientious scruple upreared a system of schools at a cost which staggers the imagination. If we could make use of the public schools generally and divert this money into colleges and universities instead of

into primary schools we should be able to establish each year a university more richly endowed than the University of Chicago; and in half a century we should have such universities sprinkled over the whole country in every state of the union. I believe that you will agree with me that, whether the Catholic scruple is well founded or not it is worthy of the admiration of all who respect manly character and loyalty to conscience, and that in view of all the circumstances it is the most remarkable fact in the current history of our country.

What, then, is the mighty impulse behind this movement? Why does the Catholic, whether professional man or laborer, willingly bear his part of this great burden? It is because he feels that the growth in religious knowledge and practice ought to keep pace with growth in secular knowledge, that religious training is an integral and essential part of the work of education, that the faith which he cherishes with tender and enthusiastic devotion is the most precious heritage that he can transmit to his children, and, therefore, if the burden were many times heavier than it is, he would gladly bear it in order that his children might be confirmed and strengthened for life in the faith of their fathers and in the practice of virtue. It is sometimes believed that the parochial school would disappear if the priest lost his enthusiasm for it, and that the laity would gladly avail themselves of the secular schools if allowed to do so. I assure you that, with exceptions here and there, the contrary is the case. It is the parent above all who demands that his child shall attend a religious school, that he shall receive carefully graded instruction in Christian Doctrine as regularly as in Arithmetic or Grammar or Reading, that he shall grow up under a discipline of reverence and obedience as his fathers before him did. I should like to lay emphasis on this point. If the laymen were not

heart and soul with the parochial school no fulmination from the pulpit would be able to continue and develop the parochial school from generation to generation. It is no desire on the part of the clergy to stand in the way of a favorite national institution. It is no unthinking echo by the layman of the lesson he has memorized from his pastor. It is a fundamental difference in the conception of what properly constitutes the business of a school. It is the deep and earnest conviction that side by side with secular training and interpenetrating and coloring it at every point must be found religious instruction and practice such as the public school by the very nature of its organization is forbidden to give. And remember, as I have already said, it is no reflection upon the teachers or officials of the public schools that this sort of training is impossible in those schools. If you attempted to give such training you would inevitably be invading the rights of conscience. We no more blame you for this condition than we should blame a marble monument for not being a tree. We simply say that with all our admiration for your intellectual equipment, your religious temper and your fine moral character we cannot use the public schools because our conscience demands of us that our children be educated under a fundamentally different system. Doctor James A. Burns, C. S. C., President of Holy Cross College, Washington, has recently stated the three chief principles underlying this difference of conception. I shall briefly summarize them for you.

I. There is the principle of the moral training of the will. We are all agreed as to the necessity of this, and both schools do their utmost to insure such training, but immediately the question arises, where shall we seek for the norm of moral action in all the details of life? Is it to be merely the natural law, the dictate of reason? If it is something above the natural law then it is definite



religious instruction which under the theory of their organization our public schools are forbidden to give. On the other hand, if it is only the natural law, our people say that it is wholly insufficient and their children must be trained minutely in morals according to the truths of Revelation and the teaching of the Catholic Church. It is easily seen that conscience is involved here and that, with the best will in the world, compromise is impossible.

II. The public school, by the very nature of its organism, cannot give definite and systematic instruction in Christian Doctrine. It is impossible to enunciate a single distinctively Christian truth without doing violence to the religious conviction of a section of the people. Now we are convinced that definite and systematic instruction in the teachings of the Church has an important bearing on the eternal welfare of our children, and if we were called upon to choose between such instruction and the most elaborate education in mere secular knowledge we should not hesitate for a moment to prefer the religious instruction. Here again is an organic defect, as we think, in the public school and one of such vast importance that it cannot be overestimated.

III. Then there is the subtle and all powerful thing called atmosphere. Wherever artists are wont to live and work and talk together you have an artistic atmosphere, and children who grow up in such surroundings naturally take to a career of art or at least have a keen appreciation of art without conscious effort. Wherever literary people form a circle apart there is a subtle influence in the direction of bookishness that touches all who come within that circle. So, too, wherever a school exists for the professed object of religious training, where teachers and pupils are of one faith, where religious songs and practices have their place in the

exercises of the day, where pictures and statues speak their mute messages to the eye and arouse appropriate emotions, you have a definitely colored religious atmosphere, the simple breathing of which does a work which no mere instruction could ever do. These influences are recognized by psychologists as the most permanent and the most powerful in the formation of religious character. As a man can never wholly get away from his ancestry, so he can never get away wholly from his own past, and where truth has been planted and nurtured in emotion it is sure to abide

I feel that my time is about up and that I can only indicate one or two other points that I should be glad to develop. First, then, it seems to me that this moral and religious training which the Church considers of paramount importance is of equal importance to our country. In organizing her school system America surely must have asked herself among other questions, "What process of education will yield me the best type of citizen?" Now a man may be a good tax-paying, law-abiding citizen, even though he spells like President Roosevelt and writes as poor a hand as Horace Greeely, but he cannot be a good citizen if his moral character is crooked.

One other suggestion which I am sure you will accept in the kindly and conciliatory spirit in which it is offered is this: If Americans of all classes are ever to understand each other on this subject all unnecessary irritation ought to be carefully avoided. Our Catholic people must cease to use such expressions as "the Godless public schools," and must deny themselves lurid tirades against an imaginary condition of discipline and morals. The friends of the public school on their part ought to avoid certain offences of taste and judgment, as I think, in the conduct of the schools. Commencement exercises ought not to be held in churches of any denomination

whatever. Clergy of whatever race, creed or previous condition of servitude ought not to make commencement addresses. Teachers, even in Bird Center, ought not to manifest intolerance of any religious doctrine or practice, ought not to say, for example, that we worship the Blessed Virgin, that indulgences are permissions to commit sin, that priests take money for forgiving sins, that Catholics are opposed to the reading of the Bible, that we are ignorant and that our Church fosters ignorance, that we believe the Pope cannot commit sin, and so on. They ought not to give partisan statements of such historical events as the Inquisition or the Reformation, and they ought carefully to avoid partisan text-books. It is a source of pride and gratification to me to observe that these offences always unwittingly committed, as I believe, are becoming more and more rare and that consequently the temper of my own people with regard to the public schools is becoming more and more fair and judicial. If all of us who have the blessed work of education to do would show ourselves more largely sympathetic, more broad-minded and cosmopolitan, the solution of the problems which torment our minds would be considerably hastened and a general spirit of sweet reasonableness would replace the spirit of acrid and passionate controversy.

Let me conclude as I began. I have attempted to state the Catholic view of the public school as frankly and as inoffensively as I can, and I am deeply grateful to the officials and to the broad American spirit which has made this possible.

*KNOWN THE WORLD OVER*

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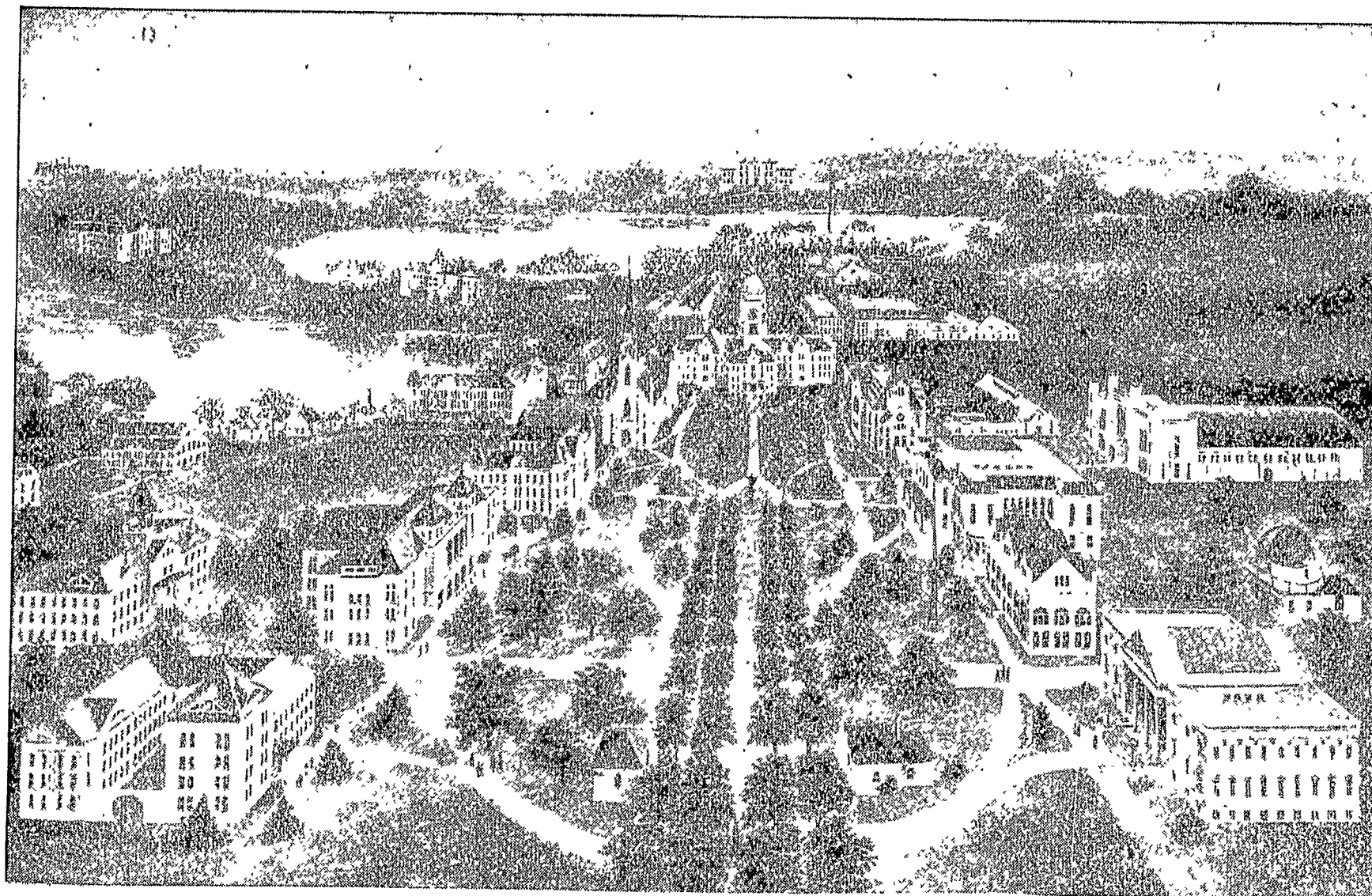


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**The Rev. John Cavanaugh, C. S. C.,**

**President of the University**

**Notre Dame, Indiana.**



BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME.

## NEEDS OF THE UNIVERSITY

Visitors to Notre Dame judge from the appearance of the buildings and grounds that the University has no need of money. It is, nevertheless, absolutely without endowment, and its work is seriously hampered because it has no resources except the fees of students. There are *two scholarships* and the interest from these foundations is used in educating and boarding two students.

There are over three thousand (3,000) Catholic students in the non-Catholic colleges of America, and very many of these will lose their faith, and all will be weakened in that faith, because our people look upon collegiate institutions as the property of private corporations which are to be left to take care of themselves.

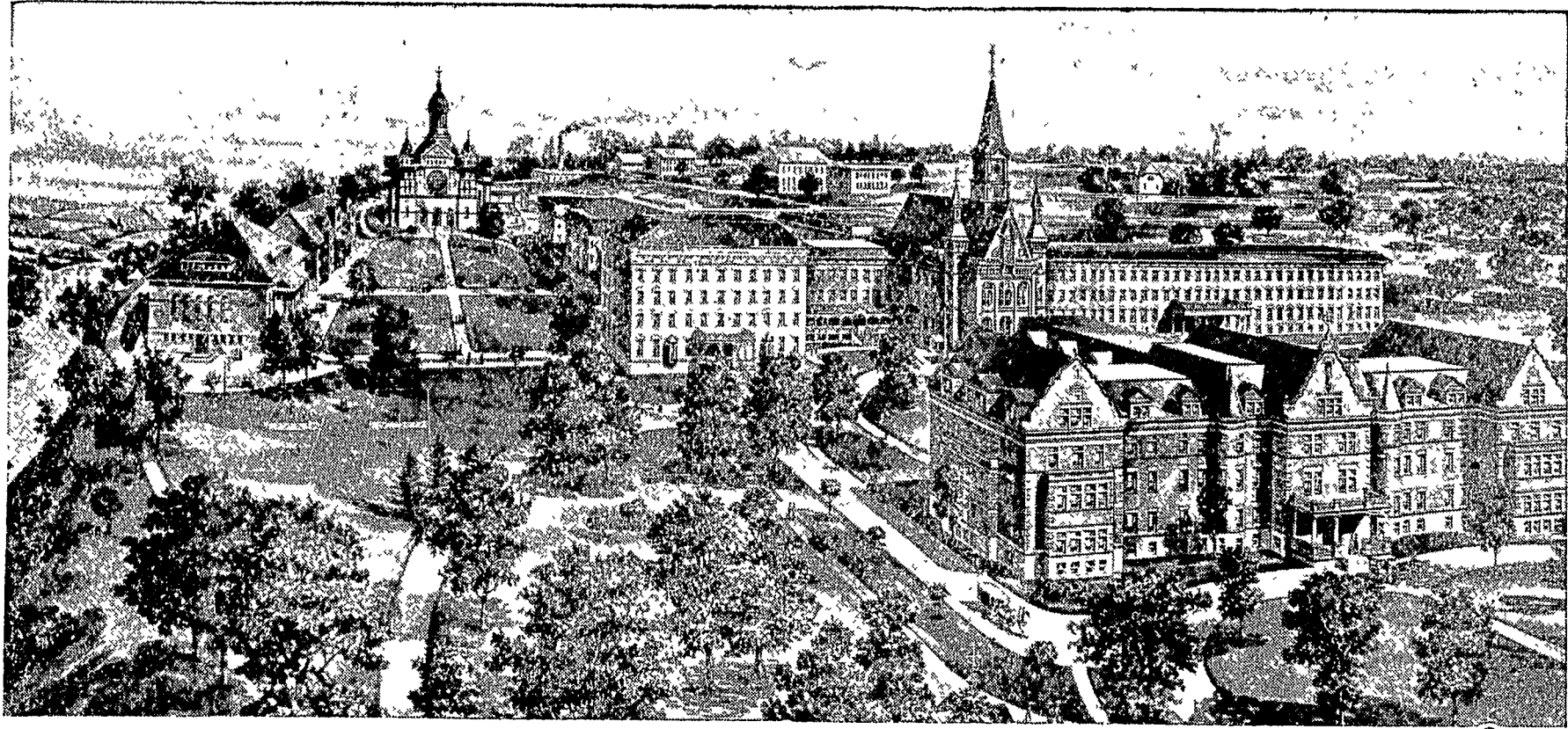
Notre Dame asks for scholarships for boys who can not pay the expense of education, and who, therefore, are obliged to go to non-Catholic colleges to the detriment of their faith. A foundation of \$8,000 will educate and board a student as long as the University exists. As one bursar is graduated another can take his place. The founder of the scholarship, of course, always has the privilege of appointing the student.

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