

By Charles De Koninck

COMMENTARY

Education Before the Age of Reason

according to Aristotle, he has not truly been brought to birth by them until they have trained and taught him.

Among some animals other than man a certain amount of teaching is likewise carried on. But the organic structure of these animals is by nature so highly specialized that the possible range of their development, as compared to man, is extremely limited, and hence is achieved in a very short time. What a man has to learn, on the contrary, if he is to live the rational animal which he is, takes a very long time. In fact, the greater his ability without teaching or training, the more help he will derive from those already trained in thought, behavior, work and communication. Any person who too soon and too readily believes that he can stand alone will never get very far and betrays a mediocre environment.

When I announce that my subject is the education of the child before the age of reason, you may feel surprised and judge this to be a queer choice for a commencement address. But you are nearly all college girls, and nearly all destined to become mothers and heads of families. It therefore seems to me urgent to put before you today a piece of ancient wisdom, a position taken by all great thinkers of the past, now more relevant than ever, though the pressure of our age is inclined to push it out of sight.

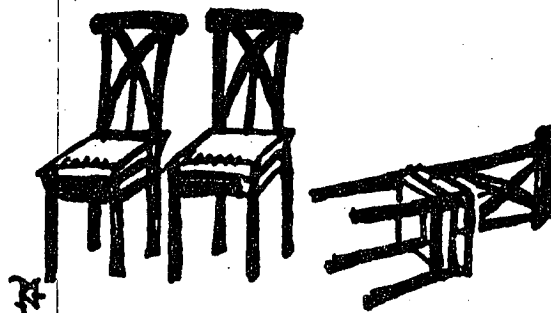
requires. But, as we all know, reason, manual dexterity and speech develop gradually. The child would remain quite helpless if left with what nature alone provides.

I mean that the needs he is born with are not immediately compensated for by the child's own reason, hands and organs of speech; it is rather the reason, hands and speech of his parents which make up for what he lacks. So vital is the new-born child's dependence on those who have brought him to birth that,

It is simply this, that no education matters so much as that given to the child during the first five or six years of his life. Both families—especially Catholic families—and government are all too ready nowadays to consider that education begins only when children are old enough for school. The fact is that by then all true education may have become impossible. Let us try to understand why this is so.

As Aristotle observed, man is born naked, defenseless, the most helpless of the animals. His native weakness is compensated for, he adds, by hands, tongue and reason. For these organs, hand and tongue, have a freedom and infinity which reason

Now, it is the mother who is more especially the first educator and teacher, as standing nearest to the child by nature. She is there from the start, and, as Plato taught: "Do you realize that the beginning of anything is most important, especially for



something both young and tender? For it is then especially that it is shaped, and takes on any mould that one wants to impress on it." For man, he adds, though gentle and capable of becoming the most divine of all animals if rightly trained, if brought up badly, can be the most ferocious of all creatures upon the earth.

So important is this early formation that Aristotle and St. Thomas went so far as to say that unless a child has been encouraged to like what is right and beautiful and to dislike the wrong and the ugly before the so-called age of reason, it will be almost impossible for him to act by virtue in later life. Notice, now, that it is education, by example, discipline and word, before the child is sent to school, with which they are concerned.

The rights of the child, then, who is the common of his family, are not confined to food, clothing and shelter. These are obviously necessary, but they are wholly secondary to the child's chief right which is to proper education from the very start.

When we hear the word "education" we think immediately of school, whereas the most important and lasting education must normally be provided by the parents at home. It is during his tender years, when the child is all touch, eyes and ears, that he is given shape or left irreparably shapeless, and, whatever, his fate, it is almost certain to be final.

Ancient and modern psychologists help us to understand this by their unanimous assertion that a child misses nothing of what goes on around him, whereas adults have acquired the habit of not noticing things. For in many respects we have become hardened in uncon-

sciousness and wrongly believe that children are like us. But though it is we who make the child's world for him, it is a very different world from ours.

If children are so open and easily formed in their tender years, no wonder that the wisest men of antiquity, both of East and West (I shall mention only Plato and Aristotle, Confucius and Mencius), in their normal

philosophy have insisted on the overriding importance of education before the age of reason.

By education here I mean both moral training and other teaching. The aim of moral training is to instill into the child the right habits before he can act on his own account, thus providing him with the opportunity to become a good person. We must be aware that a child lives in a con-

Transfiguration*

"The rest of your days depend upon the rest of your nights."

—Anon

Beneath the shining surface lies the beast
who lies with monstrous lips—Leviathan;
not only neighbors, news, and telethon
but, deep in after-Eden's verbal feast
and dream, it is our personal selves that give
too eagerly the serpent's flattering word
reality by eating fruit we heard
will give us god-like powers to know and live.

But, rising from the waves and froth of time,
a mountain offers a more hopeful sign:
upon its peak six truthful men design
an antidote to cure polluting crime.
In ecstasy one cries, "We'll build a booth
to house the one who said, 'I am the Truth.'"

Charles M. Campbell

* "Apparently the experience took place at night."
Footnote to Luke, 9:32. The New Oxford Annotated Bible.
RSV.

dition which is most precarious, for the habits he acquires will in the main depend upon the habits and thinking of his parents and of other persons with whom he grows up. All parents naturally want their child to achieve happiness.

But what is happiness for the parents? If it is true human happiness they are after, happiness in a life of action, I think that all here present would agree that the man who is temperate, brave, just and prudent, and who enjoys sufficient welfare, is a good and happy man. For it is on account of pleasure that we do evil deeds, and on account of pain that we abstain from noble ones. Happy is the man who delights in abstaining from excessive pleasure of the kind shared with the lower animals, while he who is annoyed at restraint is self-indulgent and must rely on random thrills. In this he is not unlike the beast who can only be restrained by the menace of pain. To be happy one must also be able to stand one's ground against things that are terrible, and delight in this or at least not be grieved by it beyond reason.

This is courage. While the man who is overcome by terror to the point where he prefers moral death to natural life is a coward. Now, unless one has been brought up in a particular way from childhood, temperance and fortitude in later life will be practically impossible.

Accordingly, if we allow our children to form the habit of over-indulgence in quality or quantity of food, if we allow them to believe that there is always a way of avoiding danger and that a man is honest so long as he is not caught, and good so long as he is good at something such as plumbing, playing the piano, firing things into orbit, or making money, the life for which we are

preparing him is one of misery. Now, all these predetermining qualities, or the lack of them, come to the child between cradle and school.

It so happens that what the wisest of men have taught on the nature of happiness and on the indispensable means to it is in fact most unpopular and will continue to be. Since human happiness does depend in some measure upon material possessions, men fancy that these possessions are the actual cause of happiness. Yet, to paraphrase Aristotle, this would be like maintaining that a brilliant performance on the piano was to be attributed to the instrument and not to the skill of the performer. The major philosophers, therefore, strike deeply at common opinion when they maintain that a man is less good and less happy in the measure that his goodness and happiness depend upon a large supply of external goods.

If we are to face facts we must realize that people have children before they know how to raise them, and the usual case

is they get a first inkling of what they should have done when it is already too late. Let me give you a simple example taken from ancient moral philosophy. Aristotle tells us, in his *Politics*, that as early as possible children should have something to do,

and the rattle of Archytas, which people give their children in order to amuse them and prevent them from breaking anything in the house, was a capital invention, for a young thing cannot be quiet. The rattle is a toy suited to the infant mind, and education is a rattle or toy for children of a larger growth.

In other words, the parents must learn to take advantage of the child's love of play, and put it to work. But what most people do not realize is that children love to play according to rules and are unhappy when left to play at random. This is their reasoning seeking order. It is easy enough to let a child do as he pleases, but nothing could be more likely to unsettle his character. For example, most parents believe or at least behave as if





they believe that their child should love the kind of music to which he is subjected because of his parents' own lack of education. This is ruinous. Plato, Aristotle and Mencius consider the right music as essential in child-training. And vulgar music, attuned to the disorderly cravings of our nature, is fatal. Music imitates the passions in its own special way, for passions themselves are movements; and, as George Santayana so shrewdly observed, it is less the music that moves than we who move with it.

If this is true, how harmful in effect must be the music with which we glut the air inside and outside the home. You would think that Aristotle was still among us when we find him saying that

The vulgarity of the spectator tends to lower the character of the the music and therefore of the performers themselves; they look to the spectator, and the spectator makes the per-

formers what they are, and fashions even their bodies by the movements which he expects the performers to exhibit.

So, this shameless situation is not new. But the individual parent can do much to spare the child from such unwholesome, and even chemically disturbing, noises. There is plenty of fine music available, and once accustomed to the right kind, the little ones find so-called popular music unbearable. This is something which can be established in any family if it is not too late. As to the good done by the right sort of music, this may take a long time to show itself.

Perhaps I have dwelt too long on the value of music. But it is a neglected subject and it is difficult to believe that the great minds of the past could be so unanimously mistaken about its performance.

Nothing I have said in praise of ancient thinkers should be interpreted to mean that I see no great difference between our

world and theirs, or between the task of raising a child in China or Greece and that of raising a child in modern America. While it is true that ancient and modern psychology agree that the child's very early experiences can determine the entire course of his life, there is no denying that these early experiences are so different for a modern child as almost to place him in another world.

For one thing, there is much more time for leisure, nowadays (and notice that I say time for leisure, not simply leisure), and simultaneously so many more means for wasting, spoiling and destroying leisure. As an example, consider our abuse of visual entertainment. We grown-ups are so ready to believe that a child will enjoy and profit by a message in pictures more than by a message in words; that film of a novel or an historical anecdote is the best way of conveying these to the young. But we are wrong. The medium which leaves an imagination, by nature fresh,

restless and active, with nothing to do, is the worst one possible. Again, because there is always something for the child to do, the parent will not attend to what he ought to be doing.

Nor do I mean to be critical of parents. Within and without the home irrelevancies multiply; a man faces more distractions than he has ever known. Finally, it must strike a chill into our hearts to reflect that education is for the future, not for the past. For what sort of future lies ahead for the modern family? Fathers and mothers realize, and even the youngest of their children must sense it too, how fragile and insecure human existence has become. Things seem increasingly to escape our control. They do not know what they are getting these children ready for and, hence, unconsciously become more and more inclined to evade the chief function of parenthood until burden can be transferred to professional shoulders.

Nevertheless, however difficult the task, I hope that what has been may help you to see that parents cannot avoid it, cannot normally delegate it. To shake off this sacred responsibility is impossible. We have only to translate our discussion from the natural to the supernatural plane to realize what mother and father mean to a child during the first years of his experience. He literally cannot see God, except through his parents' eyes. And when they teach him about God, they become the eyes of the Mystical Body (to use St. Thomas' expression), which should be their first achievement.

I am sorry to end on a grim note. But the most perverse and brutal philosophy ever devised would not need a single syllable of this exhortation to take seriously the child's first formation.

It is not only our Lord who says: "Suffer the little children to come unto Me." The Evil One too, desires nothing better. The government in his dark bondage is always ready to allow parents to go believing as they please, providing they deliver up their children to Marx and his servants. If there is one thing which the Church and its fraudulent imitation, Communism, are agreed upon it is the importance of education before the age of reason.

And now, young ladies, permit me a final word in behalf of your teachers here present. Inasmuch as they are genuine parents to your minds and hearts, all your life long you will owe them a duty of true filial piety. Just as the child can never achieve the full justice towards the parents who gave him birth according to the flesh, neither will you ever be able to render full justice to those who devote their whole lives to the teaching of the truth. Of course, when men such as Aristotle and St. Thomas say that it is impossible to achieve equality of justice in the matter, they are not exactly speaking of money, but neither do they exclude it. Most of you graduates will one day be parents. Remember then that the sacrifices, including material exactions at the expense of better plumbing, you will be called upon to make for the education of your children both at home and in school, are the noblest thing you can do. For that is the best way a human being can share in the Government of God.

There is here present at least one person who, according to St. Thomas' expression already quoted, is a clear eye of the Mystical Body; one who has not only devoted her whole life to teaching—which is the noblest function a creature can share in divine government—but also to the architectonic role of fostering and directing a model liberal arts col-

lege for the continent. She has crowned her work by founding a school of sacred theology whose aim is to mature eyes for the Church.

I extend to the youngest hearts on this campus, Sister Madeleva, the warm greetings of the rector of Laval University, and his expression of deep admiration and gratitude for a work whose influence reaches out beyond the frontiers of these United States.

Fare infinitely well,

You who so valorously have dared,

and all who know you are aware that you will continue to dare even after these first 70 years.

Charles De Koninck

(Prof. De Koninck, who taught at Louvain University in Belgium, presented this commencement address at St. Marys College in Notre Dame, Ind., on June 2 and June 3, 1961.)

