

REFLECTION ON RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION FROM THE FAMILY ANNALS

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Introduction

“What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul?” Mathew 16:26. What language from the lips of our Eternal Master Lord Jesus Christ! But what is the conduct of his disciples, none other than us? Why? Because we do not understand this science, the science of salvation. We do not study it seriously; we do not make it the rule of our conduct. Behold, this is the evil of our century. Let us seek to remedy it. Thank God, it has been found a long time ago; it is none other but RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION.

The remedy is the teaching of the Church given by his ministers or by those men and women who teach in his name. To seek another remedy by other means, is to deceive ourselves, is to pretend to find the day without the sun, without light. Fr.Mermier says, that Religious instruction confided to the Church and to its ministers, is not a passing, transitory aid, which one must use at a certain period of life, in some particular circumstances, but we must understand man’s need for religious instruction; he needs it at every moment of his life, from the age of reason to his last breath; he needs it for his least actions.

It is not sufficient to have known it once, it must grow with age and become clearer as we advance. If we neglect it, we will quickly become oblivious of it and fall into ignorance; then we are not only like those who have never known or been instructed, we are even much more guilty, because we ignore it through our own fault. It is, therefore, necessary to continue to receive instructions.

The means to receive religious instruction for people who have been educated, who have been sufficiently instructed from their youth, the instruction given by their pastors together with some special exercises would suffice; but for children, for youth, and for some people whose instruction has been neglected, the instructions given to the community are not sufficient.

It is here lies the important role of schools. What then must parishes and heads of families do, to have schools? To see to it in agreement with the Church and the State. What must be taught there? The end of man, his attitude towards God and man. To whom belongs the right to teach?

To the Church and to those to whom she has entrusted this responsibility: Both you and me. The short apparition Fr. Mermier I made to our pleasant home, amidst our children will recall to us:

1 The importance of holy Rules and in particular the necessity and the need of the daily meditation and the spiritual exercises.

2 The happiness of the holy liberty of the real servants of Jesus Christ who knows how to rise above human respect, and public opinion, who fear only God and what offends Him, who have but one desire which guides them in everything and in all their actions, that of pleasing Him and of doing His holy will, of procuring His glory while teaching everyone to love and know Him and especially the children confided to their care.

3 The individual and collective happiness of persons who live in community under the sweet yoke of the rule, in perfect harmony of will and action, preserving themselves from the least stains which weaken charity, sadden the soul and render it lazy in the service of God, maintaining interior peace and joy which produces concord and delicate cordiality among themselves.

4 A renewed zeal to form the minds and hearts of these children. Though all are happy with the work and progress of the students, and satisfied with the answers they gave, still the older ones would have to answer more confidently without hesitation on the principal mysteries.. Without faith, it is impossible to please God and without the clear knowledge of the principal mysteries, no one can have faith. From this we can conclude how necessary it is for the masters and mistresses of these children to instruct children about GOD and other religious dogma.

Yet, it is only the first step; faith without good works is not enough. Jesus Christ asks us for our hearts; we must be His and entirely His; He asks us to love Him; He asks for the homage and sacrifices of our heart. It is therefore, to form the hearts that you must work, praying to God, Jesus Christ, Mary, the Saints and guardian Angels, the patron Saints, for all the children, giving them everywhere good example, in the Class, in the Church, in the Parish, in teaching them at every turn, etc.

5 Finally, from each one of us , apart from the duties of a perfect obedience, a great simplicity guided by prudence is necessary and expected while imparting knowledge and awareness about GOD.

Fr.Mermier repeats to us with pleasure and filled with a sincere desire to see us always happier in our beautiful vocation as Daughters of the Cross or Associates of the Holy Cross..He would beg the Divine Master and his Holy Mother in Heaven to bless this salutary advice so that they produce their effect in our hearts.

Religious education to the children helps in forming in their hearts virtue, piety, devotion, obedience, love for work and in forming their minds with the aid of religious instruction, etc.

The parents who have no religious instruction nor education cannot train their children in virtue and piety In a word, how could they be brought up? No one can give what one hasn't got.The existing Congregations could not fill up the gap which existed between what they did and what remained to be done. The poorer class would profit by a simpler and more practical education. Which man with common sense would not agree that for these children it was enough that they be able to read sufficiently well, that they learn their religious and social duties, that they acquire the habit of living a modest, hard working and frugal life.

The evils and the needs of society in general did not escape the shrewd eye of Fr. Mermier; he examined them deeply, and with a supernatural discernment which formed part of his character, he sought for a remedy. There also, he found a strong motive to establish a kind of life that was opposed to laziness, ease, ambition and vanity, of which so many people are victims and he believed that Religious Education could be an answer to preparing children and youth in leading a meaningful life and building the kingdom of God in this earth itself

.In the words of Fr.MERMIER “The wealth of a country lies in good conduct, economy and work. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. Mathew 6:33..... You will eat your bread at the sweat of your brow. The whole plan of education should tend to that: to teach the youth that to become intelligent, prudent and wise they must before all things study their religion, learn to fear God and observe His commandments; that is what makes a man, and without that, all the rest is useless; but with that, everything prospers, even misfortunes; because religion teaches us to make a holy use of them and to bear them up with patience. He that is not convinced of this truth is blind.

Among all creatures, not excluding the most ferocious, man is undeniably the most difficult to govern; he has not only his natural pride, he is besides subject to all the passions of the human heart, spoilt and corrupted by sin. As a result, he needs a remedy in proportion to his ills. Religion has found it. But this remedy, to be useful and efficacious, must be taken, and how? Not in a mechanical manner by routine, etc... but with intelligence, with love, making a choice with discernment, in a manner conformable to an intelligent being.

It is thus, that religion has always been taught: everything must be done freely and nothing by force, combining practice with precept. F.Mermier tells us once again: education must begin that way, that is the foundation stone of this great edifice. To do otherwise is not to build up but to destroy. All men born as children of Adam are infected with this poison called pride; it is necessary to remedy this before anything else and the remedy against pride is the salutary fear taught by religion. As long as man, even a child, has not been taught to know his misery, no one has made him understand that he can do nothing without religion, that he is full of evil tendencies, that he is inclined to pride, greed, anger, etc... the other instructions will only increase his pride and all his passions. Science without fear of God, puffs up.

To be convinced of this, it is not necessary to go to look for proofs among the unbelieving nations, we find them among us. If some pagan nations were guided by some principles, it is because their rulers had the wisdom to give first importance to the lessons on fear of the Divinity, self-knowledge, etc. Those who acted otherwise only cause destruction; they made their people proud, rational, effeminate and vicious. What method are we then to follow? Everything has been chalked out in the plan followed by the Catholic Church; it consists of:

1. To teach the children the first principles of the Catholic religion; therefore, the necessity of studying and understanding the catechism well.
2. As soon as children can recognize God and know that He is the beginning and end of all creatures, it is necessary to convince them of the necessity of private and public prayer.
3. The child is weaker than any one else, it is necessary to make him appreciate the blessings of confession.

To sum up, in a few words, these are the main motives that stand out in the writings of Fr. Mermier regarding the foundation of our Holy Cross Congregation:

1. To use for the glory of God and for the salvation of souls the lives of young girls detained in the world without being bound to it and to provide them with a shelter and help in their old age.
2. To teach young girls belonging to poor families, catechism, to read and to work; to train these children to a life of hard-work and thrift.
3. To procure all the good possible to civil society by their good example, by all kinds of services rendered to the neighbor under obedience.

Our venerated Founder saw his project being realized in its fundamentals but as for the form, he could repeat the words of St. Francis de Sales:

“I did what I did not want to do, and I did not do what I wanted to do.” Behold this is what explains the existence of some passages incomprehensible to us in the first edition of our holy rules.

Besides, like the holy Bishop of Geneva, Fr. Mermier himself helped and guided the transformation of his work from its cradle. He had no time to change the written rules, but he modified the actual living of it and at his death he left it as it actually is.

He had the happiness of thus realizing the wish expressed by the most amiable of saints, in these words : “How consoled I would be, if I could see in the Church of God a society of women, where one brought no other dowry than a goodwill and a spirit of industry to earn one’s living by the work of one’s hands and who, for that, had no other choice than the work-room where everyone together participated in the joy of which the Prophet speaks: ‘You will be blessed if you eat the fruit of the work of your hands’ .”

Our Mother Foundress, Claudine Echernier was only, as she loved to say, an instrument placed by Divine Providence in the hands of Fr. Mermier. She never had the intention of founding a community, neither in her youth, nor even when she retired alone to a little room to serve God more perfectly. Her merit, which is by no means small, was to abandon herself without reserve to the good pleasure of God and to submit herself entirely to her holy director.

Who will tell us, what anxieties, troubles, work, humiliations our little Congregation cost our venerated Founder! How many times did he not journey from Annecy to Chavanod on foot, reciting the rosary, in order to instruct, encourage his daughters and to make arrangements for the spiritual and material needs of the new born community.

Thus it is explicitly clear that our venerated Founder, neglected nothing which could contribute to the prosperity of schools; nevertheless, the programme of education imposed by the educational department inspired him with a wise apprehension; it was the fear that the first place would be given to the study of subjects, which are only accessories and that religious instruction, the only necessary subject, would be relegated to the last rank. A manuscript dated 6th October, 1852, reveals to us his sentiments in this regard. It is entitled: "Considerations on the importance of religious instruction and Christian Schools." Here is an extract of the article:

St. Paul teaches us that science puffs us up and makes us proud: this is only too true; unhappily we see visible proofs of it in our days.

But what then, is this science which is so fatal and whose effects are so pernicious that it would be better to be ignorant of it than to know it? It is the science of our times, a science which is altogether human, and deals only with externals, where one stops at appearances, without inquiring into the principles, as if man was a simple automatic machine that we set in motion according to our will with the help of springs or else, a pure animal, in whom it is sufficient to form some habits by means of knocks or caresses.

Can you call such a being, a man with reason, the masterpiece of the Creator, the king of the universe? Is he that mysterious being made to the image of God, composed of two substances: the spiritual and the corporal? Who does not know that the principal part constituting man, that which forms his nature, which distinguishes him from other beings which surround him, which raises him above them to an almost infinite degree, is his soul and his noble faculties; while his body is only a coarse ignoble part which degrades him and lowers him, so to say, down to the level of things in his environment of which he himself is composed. Yes, we know it, we understand it and yet, we are still vain in our education. That is the science which puffs up, which flatters our passions, which inflames our greed, an infamous source of all evils, which can be fully summed up in these three words: pleasure, riches and honour; sensible pleasures, human honour and glory, esteem of the world, riches and temporal goods. This is the science which we teach, not only in the world, but even in good families, in families which pretend to have

religion, because they still keep to some external practices, to a superficial knowledge of their duties. Oh! Yes, this science is vain, it only makes proud men and women. But true science, the science of salvation, the science of principles which teaches man self-knowledge, fear of God above all things, observance of his commandments,”

“Deum time et mandate ejus observa,” not to do to others what one would not have others do to oneself, to love the soul more than one’s body, to prefer spiritual goods, however small they may be, to temporal goods, to be ready to die rather than consent to commit a single sin, even a venial one, to do all things, to endure all things to please God, to edify the neighbour, to assure oneself of a better life after the present one. Behold, this is the solid and fundamental science which teaches man to renounce himself, to detach himself from creatures, to adore no one but God alone, directed towards and yielding to this unique goal. This science is absolutely and indispensably necessary; without it all is vanity”.

Conclusion

Yes it is time for us to understand the truth and answer this call. Each one of us are here to realize our responsibility in making our joint venture a reality. Let us pray and practice to become instruments of GOD to follow the footsteps of our Mother Foundress to realize our prime duty to make our good GOD known and loved. . Let God be praised, may Jesus Christ so humble, who annihilated himself to the death on the Cross, be glorified, may Mary Our Lady of Compassion be our Mistress and our Mother.

As Holy Cross Associates, several among us have received the salutary and precious favour-Chastity, almost naturally having been kept away from dangerous occasions, born of parents who were religious and feared God, away from the scandals of the world, having lived poorly, obliged to work from early morning, at the sweat of our brow. The others are still young, rather frivolous; they have hardly reflected on what goes on within them. To become religious, this very natural chastity does not suffice, we must arrive at chastity of the heart. “Blessed,” said Jesus Christ, “are those who are pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

We’ve got to hasten then to become very modest, very pure in body, externally before the world, but to be that also in spirit and heart before God and before men; to be good daughters of the Cross, it is necessary to be true religious resembling the Blessed Virgin and follow the example of Jesus Christ, we must understand deeply and observe externally, this divine lesson: “Blessed

are the pure of heart. ”The means to this humility, poverty, chastity of spirit and of heart are and will be, a perfect and constant knowledge of ourselves by rendering an account of ourselves and by being daily faithful to all the lessons learnt through our Religious Education.

Bibliography

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