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THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

MOST REVEREND STEPHEN A. LEVEN*

IT SEEMS STRANGE to have to vindicate the role of the Church in education. The Church has been in the business of education much longer than any government agency. Public education is not so modern a concept or practice as public health or public housing, but it is relatively young even in American educational history.

There are some who question the Church's right to educate and do so vociferously. Furthermore, the cost of education and its problems are growing so great, only the profoundest convictions can sustain Catholic educators in their task. We must keep vindicating the role of the Church in education, even to ourselves.

It is good, therefore, to recall the words of Jesus Christ,

All power in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and behold I am with you all days, even unto the consummation of the world.¹

It is from the command of the very Son of God that the Church's right to educate stems. It is the fact of sharing in Christ's mandate which gives the dignity and the value of the Church's education. The Church is not even free to accept or reject that mandate. The command of her Founder must push her forward.

It may be objected, and it has been, that Jesus meant His Church to teach only those things essential to the salvation of man's soul. She should limit her teaching to matters of faith and morals. In these she is infallible. She should stay out of other fields in which she is accorded no special competency from God.

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¹ Matt. 28:18-20.

This sort of statement is not entirely unknown even among Catholics. It is heard especially from those who desire to compromise the words of Our Lord, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His justice, and all these things will be added besides." They want, indeed, to serve God in order to save their souls. But first must come the seeking of the things of this world in order to make a living. They claim a desire to be loyal Catholics, but they want even more to be loyal to worldly standards in which they claim to see special and precious advantages.

The role of the Church in education is a fact of history. The Church has always gathered her children about her in schools in which all the elements of human culture have been taught. Even in the far-off Middle Ages there was attached to each cathedral and monastery and convent a home of study, of teaching, of education. Only those ignorant of history can fail to marvel at the spectacle of the Church today and of the Church through the ages, with her thousands and millions of children receiving their earthly and civic as well as religious training in her schools.

The mission school is an expected part of the penetration of the Church into any society. So also is the confidence of parents, pagan and Christian, who bring their children to such schools to receive the best possible education.

The right of the Church to educate stems from her supernatural motherhood. God shares His creative power with parents in permitting them to bear children into this world of time. God shares His creative power with the Church in permitting her by baptism to bear children for eternity. It is the duty of the Church to educate those God entrusts to her so that everything they

may do or gain in time may aid them to reach Him in eternity.

In this education the Church must show how all things come from God and lead to Him. She may not let her children suppose there are any elements of human culture which are alien to God. She may not permit her educational efforts to be limited to the religious alone. She must teach *all* truth, and only she can define the terms by which that is to be accomplished.

The Church's role has always helped to keep education free from state control. This is a historical fact not always realized and appreciated by secular educators. It is a commonplace which recent history has re-emphasized that a dictatorial state always seeks control of the formation of the young. Because the Church school gives a higher and nobler formation, its abolishment is always one of the first aims of dictatorship.

We may not lightly assume that those who seek the abolishment of the Church school are always aiming at totalitarian dictatorship. No one can deny, however, that success in their efforts would be a long preliminary step in that direction. We cannot fail to be uneasy about the attack upon the Church's right to educate. It has too often been employed as a technique of state domination.

It is the private school, and in the United States this means especially the Church school, which proves and maintains the freedom of education. This freedom is maintained not only for itself but for all educators and all education. The school which is not managed by the state is in accordance with the realities of history and the philosophical foundations of education. The Catholic school has never been and never will be a complement subordinated to the political power.

It is surely not without significance that, while all Catholic educators have lately been not a little embarrassed and distressed by the spectacle of respected Catholic scholars publicly attacking the quality of American Catholic scholarship, the fear and fury generated by the appearance of the first man-made satellite seems not to be touching our Catholic schools at all. Perhaps our lack of means has kept us from indulging the whims and fancies of which other systems of education have made much. Certainly we have stayed with essentials. Not many of our schools will have to join the parade to eliminate frills for which the current temper of our country calls so vehemently.

It is to be hoped that the sobering reappraisal of American education currently in fashion may result in a greater appreciation of the role of the Church school. It is to be hoped that cooperation between private schools and public schools may be advanced to the profit of the youth of our country. We do not question the need for public education any more than we call for an end to public health and public housing. We assert that the Church's right to educate is un-

questionable — that the role of the Church must be acknowledged and welcomed in our land.

The Church has always been ready to accept the obligation to strive for the highest excellence in her schools. She has never been smug nor content with mediocrity. She holds the highest ideals before her teachers and demands the most heroic efforts of them.

The Catholic teacher in the Catholic school has the most intimate share in the first mandate given by Christ to the first bishops of His Church, "Going . . . teach." There is no higher privilege; there is no heavier responsibility. The Catholic educator must take as a personal assurance the words of Jesus to His first scholars, "You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you and have appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain."² Christ gives the call; He gives the command. Christ gives the responsibility, He gives the ability. And it is He Who gives the reward.

² John 15:16.

