



The Pilgrim

“All the trumpets sounded for him on the other side”

—PILGRIM’S PROGRESS

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Parochial Schools

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Having delivered myself of some observations on the clergy recently, I feel that I should, in all fairness, give a waiting world my views on parochial schools. They have been under attack lately, and this would seem to be the time for all good men to come to their aid.

Observation One: These schools are a very, very good thing. Founded on some wrong notions about preserving a particular national and cultural heritage, they have grown up into a significant and valid part of our pluralistic society. They contribute something fresh and vigorous to our nation: the salt air of educational non-conformity. Let others worship John Dewey. We have better things to do.

Observation Two: They can and should be better than they are, particularly theologically.

These two conclusions are based on my own experiences of parochial schools. These began on a dark September day in 1906 when I started on my daily pilgrimages to St. Stephen’s school — two and a half miles from our home in New York. For seven years, through snow and sleet and rain, through cold and heat, we walked to the little school behind the church. We had one of the best teachers I have ever known, the sainted Otto Prokopy, who handled all seven grades (for a while) with the powerful ease of a Christian gentleman.

Voice from the rear: “So you went to a one-room school! That explains a lot of things. You know nothing of buses and buildings of glass and aluminum, and the school psychiatrist waiting to ask you why you hated your father. An underprivileged child headed for the gutter, that’s what you were. How did you ever avoid it — or did you?”

Well, all I know is that when I got into the upper grades I would sit quietly while Teacher Prokopy was busy with the primary grades, and I would do my arithmetic, read my Bible history, or look at the pictures in my *Fibel*. I did not know it then, but I was getting a liberal education. My

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seat was near the window where everybody had to sharpen his pencils and my course in “social living” (big stuff these days) was a series of sotto-voce conversations with my girl friend, who had come to sharpen her pencils. I could always gauge the state of her affection for me by the speed with which she broke her pencils.

That was the beginning of my life-long survey of parochial schools. Later I found that this foundation was solid and strong. We knew nothing of today’s six R’s – Remedial Reading, Remedial ‘Riting, and Remedial ‘Rithmetic. We knew only that we had to read well and fast or we would find ourselves standing in the corner reading one paragraph over and over until we thought we were ready for another hearing.

And religion? We were surrounded by the ecology of the Faith. The prayers at nine, twelve, and three; the hymns and choir rehearsals (I still remember my sense of achievement when I graduated from soprano to alto and could imagine myself as a basso profundo in a Bach cantata); the memorizing of Scripture passages in the Catechism — these were not mere addenda to a secular culture but the very stuff of the culture in which we grew up.

I hear mutterings. Someone is saying: “How utterly horrible! Such indoctrination! Such brain-washing! How many tender psyches must have been bruised by that ordeal of standing in the corner! Were you ever really free to do what you wanted to do?” Answer: Holy smokes, we never thought of that! We had been told to obey our parents and teachers (which would appear to be a free translation of the Fourth Commandment) and, most of the time, we instinctively felt that this was a good idea. When we did something wrong, like breaking a window or stealing an apple or hitting a smaller person, and were punished for it — well, that was the way life was. This seemed to be the way God wanted it and, sooner or later, we knew that there would be forgiveness, because that too was the way God wanted it.

Of course, our schools could be better than they are. Academically? But that is not the major problem. A survey made last year seems to indicate that our children are receiving religious instruction which is not really religious in the proper sense of that term. In fact, some of our instructors might legitimately be criticized as theologically unsound. There is no religious value in being able to recite the books of the Bible, the height of Mt. Nebo,

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or the distance from Jerusalem to Jericho. We must do exactly what the Scriptures do, no more and no less: teach Jesus Christ, His reconciling life and death, His coming and going in life and in history, His blessed dominion over our hearts and minds. This we have clearly not done too well in our schools. There is too much fundamentalism, legalism, and rationalism — perhaps because it is easier to teach a fundamentalistic approach to Jesus Christ and to make the Faith a new Law. Theology is faith in search of understanding, but never at the expense of faith — the final mystery and miracle of a forgiving God.

