

The Sunday School and Confirmation.

THE Sunday School, compared with the Prayer Book, is a modern institution. No rubrics concern themselves with it, liturgiology does not find it within its ken. But not least among the many causes which led to the creation and permanent maintenance of the Sunday School was the realization that the spirit of a particular rubrical direction was not being properly observed, the direction in question being that children should be taught the Catechism "until such time that they have learned all that is there appointed for them to learn." At first the Sunday School preceded or supplemented the Day School; now it has largely taken the place of it, and not only of it but in many places and in many circumstances of parent and godparent too. We may, and we do, regret this latter fact, but it would be fatuous to ignore it. Moreover times have changed in other ways as well: the curate "diligently instructs" the children of his parish, normally to say the least, not after the second lesson at Evening Prayer, but much more adequately than he could do it then, at other hours of Sunday by the vicarious ministry of multitudes of earnest and self-sacrificing lay churchmen. The Prayer Book method is not impossible, but it is at any rate seriously ineffective in the twentieth century. Seven o'clock in the evening is not the right hour for instructing children; the Parish Church and the presence of a large congregation is not a satisfactory schoolroom, and sometimes, be it said with all respect, the curate or his assistant is not the right person for the task. Catechizing at an earlier Evensong, when children only are present, has still its enormous value, a value which would be all the greater if its importance gained for it its right place in the proportion of parochial activities. But when all is done as it should be, there is still need of the Sunday School as one of the instruments, nay the main instrument, of training the young in general and of preparing them for Confirmation in particular.

Again, the Prayer Book says nothing of special preparation for Confirmation. But although Confirmation classes are not a matter of rubric or direction, there is abundant evidence to show that the Reformers, both in England and on the Continent, and indeed many who were still obedient to Rome laid serious stress upon the need of previous special preparation for the Rite.

The Sunday School, therefore, forms an important part of the Church's machinery in the matter of preparation for Confirmation, not ordained by the Prayer Book, but in complete consonance with its spirit. That preparation is twofold, spiritual and intellectual. These two are, of course, not contradictory, not mutually exclusive, not capable even of being taken alone, but complementary and auxiliary to each other. At the present moment an effort is being made on all sides to increase the intellectual efficiency of the Sunday School, and there is serious risk that its spiritual value may be lessened, or even occasionally lost sight of. In the judgment of the present writer, that spiritual value is not only in itself the most important factor, but in the experience of life the most effective and fruitful. Nothing, not even the intellectual efficiency of the highest type of secondary education, can compensate for the slightest spiritual loss. It is the joy and duty of all of us to welcome the efforts at Sunday-School reform now being made in so many directions, but it is equally our duty to guard jealously the spiritual influence of our schools in winning the children for the faith of Christ, and in training them for its fuller privileges and responsibilities.

For Confirmation the Sunday School renders important service in both the intellectual and the spiritual sphere; it is mainly responsible for most of the earlier training, and it is supplementary to the special preparation classes. But this is not all its office: it is in most town parishes—I have little experience of the country—the main source of the supply of candidates. I am no half-hearted supporter of the Day Schools of the Church, convinced as I am that the teaching of the Faith must always have a prominent place even in secular education,

but my own experience goes to show, and care has been taken to supplement that experience with the experience of others, that the most fruitful source of candidates for Confirmation is the parish Sunday School, with all its drawbacks and despite its many and admitted defects.

It is now my business to bring Confirmation into relation to the Sunday School in more detailed fashion. There are certain questions to be asked and answered. First of all, if it is the main source of supply, how can it be made a more natural and effective source? Again, at what age are we to expect candidates to pass from the Sunday School to Confirmation? Are there any steps that we can and ought to take to see that children are retained in Sunday School or, at any rate, in connection with the Church until they reach that age? During the period that they are in Sunday School before Confirmation, how can we best train and teach them? And finally, and as usual, not least importantly, can the Sunday School or some "Dépendance" of the Sunday School help us to retain them after Confirmation, that they may be, for all the days to come, consistent and devout communicants of the Church?

1. We get most of our candidates for Confirmation from the Sunday School. Can we get more? Can we get them more easily, more satisfactorily? We shall get them more easily, more naturally, and probably more of them, in those parishes where the parish priest not only gives to the Sunday School its right place in the activities of the parish but is himself found in his right place, and that not infrequently, within it. Men's services have probably increased the efficiency of the Church's work amongst men to a considerable extent, but they have unquestionably tended to rob the Sunday School. The presence of the clergyman *in* the Sunday School is the essential link in the chain—I do not believe I am speaking one whit too strongly—which binds the children of the school to the larger organization of the Church, a chain which my clerical brethren must make into a cord of love, or they will break it. He may open with prayer, or he may only walk round and get in the way, but he

ought to be there, and to be there often. Again, the children's service, probably monthly for each section of the school, plays no unimportant part. The Reformed Sunday-School movement is a little against the "monthly service." The young Sunday-School teacher who has spent a week or more in a college, and therefore knows all about it, is generally somewhat contemptuous both of the service itself and of the way in which it is conducted, but when the Reform movement has cut its wisdom teeth it will get over that.

The divorce of Church and Sunday School is a real danger, especially up here in the North and, like all divorce, is to be deprecated. Now and again incompatibility of temper arises between the two, generally because they do not see enough of each other; sometimes, it is true, when they see too much. The maintenance of right relations, as in marriage, demands considerateness on both sides.

It is necessary to remember also the personality of the teacher. I disclaim all hostility to the Reform movement, but in the long run the love of the child for Christ and for the Church of Christ is going to be won by the real *love* of the teacher, be he or she as effective as possible in other respects, rather than by elaborateness and beauty of machinery. A kind heart is a better thing than a sand tray. Perhaps a kind heart and a sand tray is best of all. That Sunday School will send most candidates to Confirmation where the clergyman of the parish is known and loved, where the personal equation of the teacher is at its highest value, and where the most real efficiency is sought and won.

2. At what age shall the children come? There is no answer to this question. Bishop Temple is reported to have said, and the statement is characteristic enough to be true, that you may just as well confirm by *weight* as by *age*. But though the question cannot be answered, there are guiding factors in the situation which help to an answer. Let there be no hard-and-fast rule. The circumstances of modern life, the temperament of the child, the character of its home and past—all these

things, and others, will help the discerning pastor of souls to interpret the meaning of "a competent age," and of "years of discretion." Hard-and-fast rules will only lead him astray; experience and the study of the psychology of childhood and of adolescence will together give him guidance. The changes of the centuries are in this particular significant. The early medieval Church confirmed at what to us seems an inordinately early age. The later age, which has become the common rule of modern life, was not an invention of the extremer Protestants. The unreformed Church began to see that the complexity of life, even in that day, demanded preparation and delay.

The Catechism of the Council of Trent laid it down that "the Sacrament of Confirmation can be administered to all after Baptism, but yet it is less expedient that this should be done before children have the use of reason. Wherefore, if it should seem that the twelfth year is not to be waited for, it is in the highest degree proper that certainly this Sacrament should be deferred to the seventh year," fairly implying that in many cases at least delay until twelve should be the rule. After the Reformation, we find so sane and catholic a prelate as Lancelot Andrewes putting the following question in his Articles of Inquiry by Churchwardens: "Whether do all parishioners receive the Holy Communion thrice every year at the least, whereof the feast of Easter to be one, and have all, being at the age of eighteen years, duly received or not." The obvious inference is, that Bishop Andrewes did not consider the neighbourhood of eighteen years as too advanced for Confirmation. Bishop Cosin writes: "They should not be confirmed so young as they used to be, but when they are of perfect age, and ready to be admitted to the Holy Communion, which is between fourteen and sixteen" ("Cosin's Works," vol. v., p. 488). Most modern experience supports this earlier testimony. Confirmation, with all the special preparation for it, and the real blessing of the rite, comes with tremendous helpfulness to the boy or girl, free of school and starting in life, subject to new temptations from without, to new feelings, aspirations,

desires from within. The parish priest cannot know all his children; the parent, who ought to know best, is often, alas, more obstructive and misleading than helpful; the wise and loving Sunday-school teacher can often give advice, and ought to be asked for it, which may make all the difference between a real Confirmation and a travesty of the rite, which not only hurts the child but injures the Church. Every unfit and immature candidate for Confirmation is a centre of dangerous influence. Confirmation is a mere form, which may be neglected; a mere ceremony from which nothing is to be expected. It is sought from wrong motives or from none, and the blessing of the Spirit of God is lost because it is not asked for.

3. Assuming, then, that the conditions of modern life are such that it is inadvisable to urge children to be confirmed until they are clearly of *really* competent age, it is part of the function of the Sunday School to retain them and to train them until they reach that age. The retention of elder scholars has always been one of the most serious difficulties in Sunday-school work, and among them especially the retention of those who pass the normal Confirmation age without, for some reason or other, being confirmed. The precocity of modern youth, the lack of discipline in the home, and the multitudinous interests which crowd the lives, even of children—all these things are against us. For us there is the general effectiveness of the school, and there is the personality of the teacher. In some cases, the Bible-class away from the school represents something a little more grown up than school itself. In others, nothing is gained by such separation. In some parishes, an organization outside the Sunday School, something on the lines of the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavour, may be decidedly useful. The words, "something on the lines" are used advisedly. The Christian Endeavour movement presents certain difficulties in Church of England use. But a gathering on a weekday of young people, largely managed by themselves, but fostered by the clergy, will often make the religious life of

those concerned a reality, providing candidates for Confirmation and workers in the Church's service as the days go by. If an organization of this kind is to fulfil the purpose in my mind, it must *not* be in any sense a communicants' union or confined to communicants.

4. The next question immediately arises. The children are in our Sunday Schools, how can we best train and teach them? The teaching of the Bible has been considerably simplified and made much more attractive during these last years. New and better books, new and better machinery in the way of pictures, maps, etc., have helped not a little to this end. But in many and many a parish still, unless common rumour misleads me, the teaching of the Church Catechism, essential to the preparation for Confirmation, is attractive neither to teacher nor to scholar, and is sometimes either ineffective or omitted. Many efforts have been made during the last few years to remedy this. Some of them, in my judgment, have overshot the mark. A whole year's course on the Church Catechism, the lessons given consecutively Sunday by Sunday, is probably too great a strain both for teacher and for taught. Eleven lessons on the Lord's Prayer and twenty-seven on the Sacraments, however excellent the lessons, do seem in better place in a theological college than in a Sunday School. It may be old-fashioned to prefer variety and to intersperse Bible lesson with Catechism lesson, but sometimes the older fashions are the best. Too much of even so good a thing as the Church Catechism may nauseate both teacher and scholar.

Again, although it *is* possible to make the teaching of the Church Catechism attractive to the children, it is *not* possible unless the lesson is carefully prepared. The "getting up" of a lesson in a book can never be as effective as the "talking of it over" in a teachers' preparation class. In most cases the best qualified teachers are most regular in attendance at such classes. What can be done to find a remedy? If the parish priest attaches obvious importance to it, and if he takes trouble over it, part of the remedy will be found. If it is crowded out by

the less important social activities of the parish, put off, postponed, and depreciated, little wonder that teachers are absent. In a particularly difficult parish, where weekday gatherings of teachers were almost impossible, a preparation class for teachers was carried on for some years after afternoon school on Sunday with the majority of the teachers always present. It meant additional work for the clergy, additional self-sacrifice for the teacher, but it was worth it.

In the minds of some the St. Sulpice method of the Catechism has been brought into competition with the Sunday School. Is not the suggestion worth considering of a weekday greater and lesser Catechism conducted alongside the usual Sunday-School activities? The suggestion is not novel; it has been tried, and the effect has been good.

The final question now arises. How are the newly confirmed children to be retained? The answers to the question are as trite as the question itself. *Now* comes the test both of *past* teaching and of *past* influence. The shepherd of souls who begins to worry himself about his young people at adolescent age, and *only* begins then, will find abundant cause for his worry. The loyal Churchman of seventeen and twenty-one years is generally the loyal Churchman of fourteen, but a few years older. To retain *young men* and *young women* we must win *children*. All this is hackneyed indeed, but it is too important to need apology. Again, the early communicant years must be carefully watched. Such a gathering of young people as I have already referred to will be a real help in this direction, in some ways more easily used than the more ordinary communicants' union or guild. Two smaller suggestions are worth the making—one, that an annual letter should be written either by the Sunday-School teacher to every child who has been confirmed in their class and after it, or by the incumbent to those whom he has prepared for Confirmation or, better still, by making these two alternatives complementary to each other. The second suggestion is that a special service should be held each year, to which a particular invitation should be sent to

every confirmer, say, of the past ten years. The going over of the parochial Confirmation book in the meeting of a parochial staff or of a body of Sunday-School teachers might mean the recovery of some sheep of whom in the larger flock we have lost sight. Without entering upon a vexed question, it is important that young communicants should not be excommunicated in fact, though not in intention, by the sometimes impossibility of making presence at Holy Communion fit in with the ordinary avocations of their lives.

So this paper must end. It has raised more problems than it has settled, but perhaps its purpose is served if it helps us to realize the existence and the gravity of the problems raised. A new era in Sunday-School work is beginning. We have made mistakes in the past, we shall make them again in the future; but those that we shall make will be fewer and will be less serious if we are aware of the difficulties that face us in the work of winning the children for God, and bringing them both to the full enjoyment of their Christian privileges and the full realization of their Christian responsibilities. *Sit finis scribendi, sed non finis quærendi.*

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