



To promote the cause of Religion and Justice by the ways of Truth and Peace.

LEO. XIII, to the N.Z. TABLET

THURSDAY, JULY 13, 1905.

BIBLE-IN-SCHOOLS: THE LATEST MOVE



NCE upon a time there was a merry gambol at the Lambs' Club in London, Maurice Barrymore was there—the idle visionary, the talker whose tongue wagged volubly of grand projects to which he never set his hand, the man who was happiest in verbose indolence. On him Wilton Lackaye wrote the following mock epitaph—as good in its pungent way as that which was composed for 'Nolly Goldsmith, for shortness called Noll':—

'He talked beneath the stars,
He slept beneath the sun;
He led the life of going to do,
And he died with nothing done.'

This mocking epitaph might be placed on the gravestone of the average cleric of the Bible-in-schools League. For a generation these good people have 'talked beneath the stars' about the crying evil of letting the children of their various faiths grow up in comparative ignorance of religion; in synod and assembly and conference they have been 'going to do' great things to illuminate the young idea with knowledge of the world to come; but they lolled and dozed and 'slept beneath the sun' through all the precious years, while Catholics were up and doing; and hundreds of them have died, and hundreds more will die, 'with nothing done.'

A few weeks' spasm of sporadic activity stirred the dreamers here and there when their flagrant neglect of one of the most sacred duties of the Christian ministry was exposed by our Bishops in their second manifesto. Then came Nepenthe again and closed their eyes, and they 'slept beneath the sun' with the same 'masterly inactivity' as before. The recent formation of a 'National Education Defence League' in Dunedin has waked some of them up again. It has led to a merciless castigation, through the secular press, of the faithless pastors who have neglected in so flagrant a way an elementary duty of their calling, sought to shuffle its unwelcome burden to the shoulders of State officials, and get it done at the cost of the general taxpayer. Here and there the lash of stinging comment has got beneath the outer skin. It has goaded a few—though only a few—of the Bible-in-schools clergy in Otago to gird up their loins and undertake the work of imparting religious instruction to the children of their flocks in the public schools. It is better to fulfil one's obligations from the wholesome internal impulse impaired by a sense of sacred duty than from the outward application of journalistic raw-hide. But it is better that it be done from the less exalted motive than not at all. The appetite often comes (as the French say) with eating; and those clergymen of the Bible-in-schools League who begin under the impulse of less perfect mainsprings of action will, we hope, soon share with Catholics the joy of doing good to Christ's little ones for Christ's dear sake. In the meantime, their action, considered in itself, is at the same time an example and a

reproach to the armor-clad consciences of their indolent confreres who still 'lead the life of going to do,' and are likely to die 'with nothing done'—so far as personal effort or sacrifice on their part is concerned.

For the determination of those Bible-in-schools clergy—late-born though it be—to do their own duty themselves, we have nothing but words of encouragement and commendation. But from the methods on which they propose to set to work, we wholly dissent. In their first manifesto, our Bishops said:—

'Valuing as we do the written Word of God, and teaching it in our schools, we would gladly see it brought home to the mind of every child, Catholic and Protestant, in New Zealand. . . . We are in sympathy with every effort to impart religious instruction to non-Catholic children in the State schools after working hours, so long as those of our faith are first permitted to retire without taunt or interference. But we strenuously object to the introduction of Scriptural or other religious lessons or exercises into public schools as part and parcel of the programme of education.'

Now this is, in its practical effect, what some of the waked-up clergy of the 'Referendum' League are demanding of sundry School Committees here and there. Their method was put in a nutshell some days ago by a clergyman in Dunedin. He says:—

'I have applied for one half-hour a week to impart Scripture lessons to the children attending the schools, my lessons to be given within the ordinary school time. The time required by the Act is four hours per day. The St. Clair school hours are five, fixed so by the School Committee, as they have a right to do. I cannot come in within the four hours without fresh legislation, which we have been trying to get in vain for years, but I can come in, Bible and all, within the five hours, if the Committee will give me permission, which is within their rights.'

The further information was tendered that this plan is in operation in Nelson—where, we may add on our own account, sectarian feeling is higher and (as the last report of the Minister of Education shows) the educational efficiency of the State schools is lower than in any other district in New Zealand. Into the question of the legal rights of School Committees we do not propose to enter. We merely ask: Is our 'free, secular, and compulsory' Education Act so clumsily drafted that one of its groundwork provisions can be, in effect, set aside at the mere fiat of a School Committee? Are they, in being allowed to increase the school-hours by one per day, thereby empowered to introduce into the fifth hour items of instruction which are expressly barred by Act of Parliament during the other four? Does our Education Act permit Committees, during this magical fifth hour, to introduce religious tests into the public schools (in the shape of written protests against particular brands of spiritual instruction), or, failing the imposition or acceptance of such tests, to permit what would amount, in effect, to something like wholesale and systematic proselytism? For these are, substantially, the alternatives presented to little recusants by what is now talked of as 'the Nelson plan'. If the Bible-in-schools clergy can get behind the plain intent of the Act in this way, the sooner it is amended the better it will be for the educational peace of New Zealand.

It may, of course, be urged, that Catholic, Jewish, or other parents would be under no obligation to send their children to school except during the four hours appointed by law. But (1) this obviously does not meet the case of Catholic teachers and pupil-teachers who would be required, by the terms of their employment, to be present to preserve order, etc., at the proposed courses of sectarian religious instruction. Sundry incidents of public school life in Victoria, to which we have more than once made reference, furnish a bitter experience of the outrage to religious sentiment which Catholic teachers might expect under the proposed new departure of