

CATHOLIC DISABILITIES

ADDRESS BY REV. FATHER BARTLEY,
S.M., M.A.*

The following address was delivered by the Rev. F. S. Bartley, S.M., M.A., at St. Mary's Hall, Nelson, on September 27:

The Catholic Federation stands for all those things which we as Catholics may nobly and justly ambition in the religious, civil, and social life of New Zealand. Where there are grievances to be redressed, there you will find the Catholic Federation, awaiting the opportune moment, seeking the surest method, but it stands pledged to fair and above-board methods, and whether it be in propaganda work of press, pamphlet, public meeting, or deputation, or even in the roped square of an election campaign, the Catholic Federation will violate neither the letter nor the spirit of the laws of the game. But this must go on record—that as Catholics have fought and died under the united crosses of St. George, St. Andrew, and St. Patrick, so Catholics shall have their full share of those liberties for which the dear, grand old flag must ever be the emblem.

The rights of conscience are God-given, sacred, and inviolable—rights which no man gave, which no man can take away, nor any man honestly surrender. And yet during the past forty years, Catholics have been victimised for conscience' sake. In 1877 the Hon. C. C. Bowen, the then Minister of Education, introduced the Bill for free, compulsory, and secular education. The measure passed into law, but Catholics would not give up their schools—would not, because they could not in conscience. They held then, they hold now, that to dechristianise the school is to dechristianise the race, and come what Catholics would not see the noblest function of education swept idly away. Year by year have we taken over this trust and this burden, and while the burden was heavy, the trust was sacred, the burden has been bravely borne, the trust nobly discharged. To-day we maintain at our own expense 180 primary schools, staffed by 647 teachers, with an attendance of 14,000 scholars. The cost per child in the State schools for the year ending March, 1916, was £3 18s 2d; so our schools last year effected a saving to the State of £97,000.

It is high time that the New Zealand public studied these figures in sober earnest. They are convincing proof that it is conscience alone that has dictated our policy. For forty years have we paid heavy toll to the sacredness of principle. Sacrifice is the touchstone of sincerity, and the history of the past forty years is irrefragable testimony that the desire for our own schools is born of conscience, and not of passing whim or obstinate caprice.

How has all this been accomplished? By the munificence of the wealthy? Not so. The poor we have always had with us, and it is the poor man's mite rather than the cheque of the rich man that has been our unfailing stand-by. We must not forget the real endowment of our schools; that alone has made our system possible—our devoted Sisterhoods and Brotherhoods, those unselfish men and women who have consecrated their lives to the noble cause of education. The average salary for State school women teachers last year was £141, and multiplying this by 647, we have a total of £91,227. To this amount have we been yearly endowed by our religious teaching Orders, and to this we must add the cost of building, furnishing, etc.

In the name of common, decent, and let it be whispered, British fair play, have we not a right to have the whole question reopened? We have staggered under this Herculean burden for forty years, and I refuse to believe that the New Zealand public will want us to carry it for ever. We want the whole discussion stripped of passion and prejudice, judged on its merits, and attacked with a free and impartial mind. What we have done we have done for conscience' sake, and this fact we want placed in the forefront of

the inquiry. Too long and too unfairly has the New Zealand voter swallowed the shibboleth of the free, compulsory, secular system. Many who vote thus vote unthinkingly—they are enamored of a high-sounding combination of words, and could not tell the difference between a secular system and a circular saw. It reminds one of the old lady who always felt a spiritual uplift at hearing the 'lovely, blessed word Mesopotamia.' But let the people understand all that the system stands for—for themselves and for us. The Bible-in-schools movement has shown anxious heart-searchings avert the sins of omission in the present national system, and our conscientious abhorrence of it has been before the public these forty years. Many think we will make it an election issue, but we do not intend to commit political hari-kari; we do not propose to disfranchise ourselves, and be ridden down by a juggernaut of a six to one majority. Bring in proportional representation; bring in any system that does not decide matters of conscience by a mere counting of noses, and above all have the case pondered over on its merits, and the ballot-box will yet do us fairly justice. But that the public sentiment is for all time married to the present unfair system I emphatically deny. Your New Zealander is too fair to be tyrannous over-long.

That the separate existence of Catholic schools has bred religious bitterness is a blind, false, and cruel charge. I appeal to the best of the citizens of Nelson to refute it by their experience of their old St. Mary's School. For one Catholic I could name you three or four non-Catholics who have proudly boasted to me that they were old St. Mary's boys. Were a reunion held here in Nelson of men gathered from all parts of the Dominion, of men in the highest positions of trust and honor, it would warm the coldest heart to hear them proudly tell of bygone days in old St. Mary's, and that school founded by dear old Father Garin, that school that welded all creeds and classes into one perfect harmonious whole, is a type of those schools to which we Catholics have given our energy and our self-sacrifice. What we want, what we plead for, what in the name of justice we demand, is a real national system that will scorn to shut out one child in seven because of that one child's conscience.

I limit myself this evening to our primary school disabilities, but, believe me, we have much to complain of with regard to the difficulties under which our secondary schools suffer. Those complaints fall under three heads—free places, scholarships, and leaving-school certificates. Ninety per cent. of the boys entering St. Patrick's College, Wellington, have proficiency certificates and are entitled to free places. And yet, because they elect to avail themselves of the elementary British liberty in going to a college that accords with their conscience they are forced to forego £10 15s 11d a year. But more of this anon.

I find it hard to understand how the Council of Education can even attempt to justify some of their recent actions. Consider the point-blank, stone-cold refusal which the Hon. Mr. Hanan gave to a recent Catholic Federation deputation. Among other things, it asked that the benefits of medical inspection of schools should be extended to Catholics. This inspection was taken over by the Education Department, not as part of its regular duties, but only because the schools were convenient places for such inspection. As citizens and as taxpayers we have a right to have our children medically examined. But it appears we have not. We are pariahs, we are social outcasts, and our children will be rigorously ignored. Why does the medical officer in going from Nile street to Brook street hurry past Manuka street as though it were plague-stricken? She does not even pause to call out 'Bring out your dead.' It appears there are not sufficient doctors to attend to our few schools along with the many. The Catholic Federation undertakes to provide doctors to supply the shortage. But no! We are outside the pale, and we are to be kept out. I say, and I say it advisedly, that the Minister's answer is no answer, at least it is not an explanation that