

AUCKLAND DIOCESAN CATHOLIC TEACHERS' INSTITUTE

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS. (Continued.)

ART IN THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL.

(By a Sister of Mercy.)

By many of you it will be deemed superfluous that at our second conference the subject of art in the school should again be treated. That it is so, is largely due to the influence of the excellent paper read last year, which, sinking deep into the minds of the teachers, has caused them to examine the position with reference to the education of the whole nature of the child by satisfying his aesthetic no less than his intellectual requirements.

In many of the schools, work of a practical nature has been commenced through the aid given by the school magazine's excellent series of picture studies. Having made a beginning then, it is easy to follow the gleam ahead and continue the great work of unfolding to our children their priceless heritage in Christian art. At the same time it is well to define the Catholic position in relation to that great body of art which by nature of its content is manifestly outside the pale of the Catholic school or home. Our catechism is so explicit on this point that nothing contrary to modesty could receive the sanction of any Catholic. With this provision the position has in recent years been fairly well defined, and we now take it to include all the fine arts and their creations whether we find them in the service of the Church as embellishments of our churches, schools, homes, or cemeteries. Furthermore, we define the service of the Church to include all artistic expression of such an uplifting nature as to be in perfect harmony and accord with Christian ideals and principles. A review of any of the books dealing with the treasures of the Vatican will show how truly Catholic such a collection may be. Here, side by side with painting and sculpture of the Augustan ages of Christian art—the glorious three pre-Reformation centuries,—are to be found the treasures of ancient Greek, Roman, and Byzantine art, as expressed in their sculpture, pottery, mosaics, stained glass or manuscript illumination. Francis Thompson, in his essay on Shelley, has aptly summarised the Church's position in the matter of poetry. All that is highest and noblest in human expression has emanated from the Church under its aegis and direct patronage, but the puritanical back-wash has left us a legacy of narrowness that, allied to the poison of Jansenism, has abandoned art to the pagans, so that Christian art now reaps a harvest of desolation. If this be true of poetry how much more true of the manual arts? Can educated Catholics view the barrenness of their artistic fields without a pang of regret for the days of long ago when religion walked hand in hand with art from the cradle to the grave? Can we see our children deprived of the joy of knowing their immense artistic heritage and yet complacently assent to all the avenues to art being barred by the vilest representations of a modern art that is the spawn of heresy, debased and corrupt from the penny *Comic Cuts* to the threepenny "movies" that are the only pictures presented to our children? We thank God for the great nature study movement that has given our children some slight knowledge of that finest gallery in the world where a Divine Artist never ceases to allure us from the sordidness of earth by a glimpse of His Eternal Beauty in field and flower, mountain and valley, streamlet and seaside. Having that panorama unfolded to them by the truest teaching our children are, at least while out of doors, safe from contagion.

But what shall we say of the indoor art that prevails? In the homes of the poor we are confronted with the most inferior representations of Christian art that German oleographers could turn out for mere profit. Yet how they are loved and revered by our

poor people whose beauty-loving Celtic minds make every excuse for their machine-made representations of Christ and His saints. They realise fully that even the poorest picture may carry the deepest spiritual message, and with a veil of noblest charity they apologise for the medium and consider that the end surely justifies the means.

With the steady growth and development of our schools we see each year a proportionately larger body of our Catholic students entering the professional world. For these, to whom God's goodness has secured a fair measure of artistic knowledge, either through the opportunities for travel or through literary channels, we have no special message but it is for the great bulk of our working classes that we should now take thought. In new countries the wheel of fortune takes many strange turns and no one can dare to assert that our boys and girls of to-day may not take their places in the front rank as captains of industry or as mere politicians have it in their power to plan our cities. For one profession which has, appropriately, remained largely in Catholic hands even in Auckland—that of architecture—it is highly desirable that our pupils should be made acquainted with its fundamental principles. Our cities are yet to build. Our churches and schools will doubtless be raised by the hands and brains of those now in our schools. What an incalculable benefit it will be to all to have them thus instructed. Then will the kindred arts of sculpture and painting be called for as embellishments of these buildings. It were rankest folly to attempt to prognosticate what form the art of our young lands will take, but we, as educators know that as surely as "the twig is bent the tree's inclined," and so surely will the bias given to our pupils in these years to come prove the strongest lever towards the appreciation of their artistic heritage and its inevitable consequence, the uplifting of all the art to be in this new land to the ideals of Christianity. Only in this way can we combat the atheistical and materialistic views of art that, perhaps owing to our lack of vigilance in the past, are now rampant in our midst.

Let this then be the clarion call. Let our teachers be fired with a holy enthusiasm to instil into their pupils a horror of ugliness as a sin against Divine Truth and Beauty, and a desire to surround themselves with all that is purest and best in domestic no less than in civic art. Besides the field marshal's baton that every boy carries now-a-days in his knapsack, who knows but there may be chisels and brushes that will carve and portray to future eyes glories to rival those of our beloved old masters.

To be practical, how is this to be done? Where are we to begin? What methods shall we use? perplexing questions, all of them, but there is a key and who runs may take it and open the door. Let us restate our aims.—(1) To teach religion through art. (2) To elevate and refine the mind by the appreciation of our Catholic art heritage. (3) To set the feet of our people on the royal road to excellence in all creative arts. That there is any startlingly new proposition in either of these three all our best teachers will stoutly deny. Many have done this for years. The Montessorian idea of sense training has taken hold of the teacher's mind with the result that even our most junior classes are being led to a fair sense of color, sound and form discrimination that was unknown in such a general sense in our own school days. Nature study has reached great perfection in our midst, and in this again is God's kindly providence most justly shown. Deprived of great models of human achievement that are the common property of our Mediterranean kinsfolk, His loving hand compensates for this barrenness by dowering our land with rarest beauty in the natural order. Earth and air are full of His voices. So notable is this that critics have declared that Auckland may yet be the Athens of the South in more senses than one. But a pagan Athens, God forbid!

To return to the practical note. A commencement in art training has already been made. Drawing and

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