

CATHOLIC EDUCATION
AND ITS
RELATIONSHIP TO THE CLASS STRUCTURE OF THE UNITED
STATES

The following is a lecture of Father Fitzpatrick's which was reprinted in DECISION, April, 1962.

Fitzpatrick 2837

Monsignor Illich has asked me and Father Fichter to continue your discussions about the development of Catholic Schools in Latin America. As I understand him, he wants us to point out to you what way a school system becomes related to a social system. No school system, much less a Catholic school system, exists in a vacuum; it exists in a very real society, at a definite moment of history, and in a definite political environment. Therefore, a Catholic school system, developed in the United States, cannot be transferred to another culture or another social system without important changes and adjustment. What I will try to do this evening is this: to clarify for you the way our Catholic School System has grown out of a unique political and historical experience in the United States, and to indicate the way it is intimately related to the class structure of the United States. It makes sense only in that context. Then, Father Fichter will explain the class structure of Latin America, and the relationships of Catholic Schools to the class structure of that area. In this perspective, I think your further discussions about the establishment of Catholic schools in Latin America will be more fruitful. Therefore let us begin.

The School and the Unique Experience of the United States

In the United States, the rise of education grew out of a revolution in social class. It had many other aspects also as we shall see, but this was one of the central ones. The founders of this Nation were determined that privilege was never more to be related to the accident of birth. In other words privilege was to be made available to all people regardless of their origin. A man was to be able to reach that level of development to which his natural ability and his own efforts entitled him. This was

the central value of American society and culture. The development of Catholic education in the United States must be examined in relation to it.

The Political Ideal

The definition of the class revolution took place very consciously in a political form at the beginning. The objective of the founding fathers was to create a political structure in which all men, as free men, could participate. They looked upon this as the main foundation of a free society of free men. Participation in political life was central. And political participation was to be a privilege extended to all. Some qualification is necessary here because in the beginning, as we know, political participation was related to property ownership or property rental. However, it was not long before the pressure of the ideals of the Nation exerted itself and eliminated the property qualification for political participation. Once political participation was extended to all people, it became evident that opportunities for education would have to be extended. If men were going to participate intelligently in political life, and fulfill their responsibilities as citizens, they had to know what the Nation was about. In other words, they had to be educated. Therefore, the early pressure for education had a practical motivation. It was aimed at the training of people for responsible citizenship. And since responsible citizenship was the political privilege of all people in the United States, it soon became obvious that education had to be made available to all citizens in the nation.

Education As A Value in Itself

However, granted this very practical objective which motivated the development of education, it was not to remain only a practical instrument.. The Citizens of the Nation recognized education as a value in itself. The new concept of man as a free citizen capable of developing himself, enjoying the opportunity of advancing socially, intellectually and economically as far as his talent and effort would carry him, this new concept led to

a recognition of the value of education as the primary means of developing man as a man. It was to be the instrument by which he was to develop all of his faculties, to reach that fulfillment and that perfection of which he was capable as a man.

The Rise of Class Division

It is clear, therefore, how the origin of education was related to our political ideas, and to the central value of American life which aimed at the development of each individual. However, something was soon to occur in the United States which no one had foreseen. The Nation began to develop in the early part of the nineteenth century as a strong industrial and commercial power. In the early days of the Republic the leaders of the Nation had conceived of the Nation as an agricultural Nation, with the citizens made up of large numbers of independent farmers or land owners. They had never foreseen what was to take place or the effect of industrial and commercial development on the future of the Nation.

As industrial and commercial development began to take place very rapidly, division began to appear among the citizens, a division into recognizable classes, roughly characterized as upper, middle, lower. The interesting thing is that this division of classes was to be based, not on family or birth but on occupational success. The United States was to become, par excellence, a business society. Opportunity for advancement became defined as opportunity for business success. And with business success went advancement of social position and prestige. In American society a man's position very largely has come to depend on what he was doing; and how successful he was in doing it.

This division into classes was not in itself a denial of the American ideal. Granted that recognizable classes developed, there was no mechanism created which would make these class divisions rigid. There was always the possibility for someone on the lower levels to advance himself

to higher levels; and theoretically at least there was always the possibility of someone on the higher levels falling to the lower levels. We are all aware of that common American saying: "From the hod to the hod in three generations." This is not a very accurate description of our social history, but it at least expresses the American experience as it is perceived widely by the Citizens. In other words, regardless of class division, a poor person still had the hope that, if he had the ability and made the effort; he could advance very rapidly.

Now this industrial and commercial development came to depend crucially on education. Granted that there are dramatic incidents of poor uneducated men rising to high positions, nevertheless, it was to be the much more ordinary experience of Americans that education was the prelude to business and commercial success. It came to be the essential element in a man's effort to advance socially. And in order to advance socially he had to advance economically.

The Relationship of The School to Social Class

In response to these three values, the value of political participation, the value of education as the instrument of man's development, the value of education as a means to social and economic advancement, a strong effort developed, a pressure to create a common school system, I mean a system of education which would make education available to all children, or all citizens, regardless of their origin or their social class. Therefore, in the early part of the nineteenth century we see the consistent pressure to form a school system in which every American child would be given the opportunity of sufficient education.

It was within this context, a unique historic experience, that the Catholic school system was to develop. Note that it also is a response to this pressure for the opportunity of common schooling. If the American school system had not developed, it is very unlikely that a Catholic school system would have developed either. In other words, the real pressure for Catholic schools developed from the pressure to keep the common school system secular, that is, to make sure that religion was not to become a

part of the regular curriculum in the common school. In response to this Catholics realized that if their Catholic children were to receive the same benefits of the common school system and were to have their faith taught to them together with the secular subjects in the school, they would have to create a school system that was Catholic. You are all much more familiar with this history and this background than I am. The reason I mention it here is to indicate its close relationship to the social organization which was developing in the United States, and to the pressures in the United States for a common school system. Therefore, the Catholic school must be examined in context of this unique historical experience in the United States.

The Immigrant Experience

Against the background of these developments another extraordinary historical experience occurred, the arrival from abroad of millions of poor immigrants who wanted to become citizens of the United States. It is true that many immigrants had been here before the school system developed. But the great waves of immigration were to take place after the school had begun to develop.

Many of the immigrants were Catholic people, the Irish, some of the Scotch, some large numbers of Germans and a scattering of others from England and the Continent. Later on, the wave was to increase that was to bring the Italian, the Pole, the Central European and others. These people came for the most part as poor, underprivileged, working class people. They had come from the farms and rural sections of Europe and the British Isles, and they came into a society which was to give them what few of them had enjoyed before, the privilege of political participation, and the opportunities for social and economic advancement. In the life of the immigrant, therefore, the school became the central and significant instrument of advancement in American society. I do not mean to underestimate here the difficulties which immigrants faced and the resistance they suffered at the hands of the Protestants who had been here before them. But they

responded energetically to this new world of opportunity. They saw for the first time the possibility of social advancement, and they dedicated themselves to it with a vengeance.

For the Catholic, therefore, who had the opportunity of attending Catholic schools, the Catholic school itself became an instrument of social and economic advancement. Undoubtedly the basic principle and policy of the Catholic school was still the formation of children in the Faith. In other words, our objective was to prepare Catholic children for political participation, to provide them with opportunities for personal development, and to communicate this in the context of training in their Faith. However, the school could not escape the social context and it has always played a significant role as the transmission belt for immigrants from lower to higher status in American society.

The Catholic School System

This role of the Catholic School in relation to the experience of America and the experience of the immigrants, has had a profound effect on the nature of the Catholic Church in the United States. Notice what has happened. The immigrant brought the Church with him. And at the beginning the Catholic Church was the Church of poor, underprivileged, immigrant people. But as these people advanced to middle class American status or even higher, they brought the Church with them to this higher class position. As a result, the Catholic school at the present time reflects the predominant middle class American position of Catholic people. It is definitely a middle class American institution, with the organization, attitudes, ideas, very characteristic of middle class American life. This creates another special problem for the Church at the present time. When the early immigrant came to the United States and faced the shock of adjusting to a new culture, the opposition, the people who resisted him and sometimes persecutes him, were Protestant Anglo-Saxon people. Therefore, as the immigrant Catholic organized his forces against this threat, his efforts to protect himself, to protect his status, to advance himself, crystalized around his devotion to the Faith. In other words, loyalty to the Faith

became a reinforcement of the solidarity of immigrant Catholics in their struggle against the older Protestant Americans. I think it is safe to say that a good deal of the strength of the Church came not so much from the dedication of Catholics to their Faith as from the fact that the Faith became the central focus of immigrant loyalties in their defence of themselves. It is interesting to speculate about the problems which this now creates for people like Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. As lower class underprivileged Catholics now move into the Country, the Puerto Ricans and Mexicans are good examples, the opposition they receive is not coming from Protestant Anglo-Saxons, it is frequently coming from middle class American Catholics. Therefore, the Faith can no longer be the focus around which the solidarities of the immigrant community form... What effect this will have on the Puerto Ricans and the Mexicans, no one can say at the moment. But it indicates how serious is the problem for Catholics of relating themselves effectively to Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, and of convincing these poor and underprivileged Catholics that they belong as an integral part of our Catholic Church in the United States.

I hope that this has clarified to some extent how intimately our Catholic school system is related to our social class system in the United States. Our school system makes sense in the context of our American class system and of our American experience. It is also obvious that a school system created in this way, and developing as I have described it, cannot be transplanted to another class system where the historical experience has been entirely different.

Therefore the question we must ask is this: Given the historical experience and the social and political context of Latin American Society, what adaptation of the common school training of the Catholic School will be capable of achieving in Latin America something similar to the success which has been achieved in the United States? It seems to me that the central point of some of your discussions would be this:

What is the social structure of Latin America?

How is it changing?

What are the dynamic forces at work?

How are they related to the whole concept of common schooling?

Given this knowledge, how should a Catholic school system be introduced into these Nations in order to achieve the success which it has achieved here in the United States. As Father Fichter outlines the class structure of Latin America, you can compare my remarks with his and I think it will give all of us much to think about and much to discuss.