

POPE PIUS XII SPEAKS TO MOTHERS

Allocution of Pope Pius XII

'DAVANTI A QUESTA'

1941

Translation by Canon G. D. Smith

Foreword

By CANON E. J. MAHONEY

It might seem an unusual procedure, if not an impertinence, for a priest to preface an important papal utterance with a few words of his own, were it not thought opportune to remind the reader of two other fairly recent directions of the Holy See on what is, perhaps, the most significant portion of this address`-the section headed 'The training of the will in adolescence.' In the Encyclical of Pius XI on the *Christian Education of Youth*, 31 December, 1929, we are warned against the public and indiscriminate imparting of precautionary instructions on sexual matters to the young, since evil practices are the effect not so much of ignorance of intellect as of weakness of a will exposed to dangerous occasions, and unsupported by the means of grace. In this extremely delicate matter, if, all things considered, some private instruction is found necessary and opportune, from those who hold from God the commission to teach and who have the grace of state, every precaution must be taken.' A decree of the Holy Office, 21 March, 1931, condemned in general terms a purely secular type of sex education or instruction and, referring to the above Encyclical, declared that our first care must be to train the young in the virtue of purity by religious means: recourse to prayer and the sacraments, devotion to Our Lady, and the careful avoidance of all sinful occasions. (A.A.S. xxiii, 1931, p.118.) The present papal pronouncement, it will be observed, is more explicit and detailed than either of its predecessors, and will set at rest the scruples of some Catholic parents who may have thought that a policy of complete secrecy is the Catholic practice and tradition.

The Pope Speaks to Mothers

(Allocution of Pope Pius XII to a concourse of women of Catholic Action and their helpers from all the dioceses of Italy, on the Feast of Christ the King, 26 October, 1941A.A.S., 1941, xxxiii, pp. 450-458.)

As We look round upon this splendid gathering of mothers, teaching sisters, schoolmistresses, representatives of the children of Italian Catholic Action, and others who devote themselves to the work of education, Our thoughts go beyond the threshold of this hall, beyond the confines of Italy, and reach to the ends of the earth as We embrace all those dear children who are the flower of the human race and the joy of their mothers' hearts. At the same time We are mindful of the immortal Pope Pius XI who in his Encyclical *Divini illius magistri* of 31 December, 1929, treated so profoundly of the Christian education of the young. Dealing with this important subject he judiciously allocated the parts which belong respectively to the Church, the family, and the State, and then went on regretfully to observe that parents are often unprepared or ill equipped for their work as educators. Accordingly, and since the limits of that lucid and exhaustive document did not permit him to deal in detail with education in the home, he exhorted in the name of Christ all pastors of souls to use every means, by catechism and instruction, by word of mouth and in widely published writings, to ensure that Christian parents are well instructed both in general and in particular regarding their duties in the religious, moral, and civic education of their children, and regarding the best methods-apart from their own example-of attaining that end."

In so exhorting the pastors of souls the great Pontiff was exhorting parents also, fathers and mothers alike. But we believe that we are acting in accordance with the desire of our venerated Predecessor in reserving this special audience for mothers and other teachers of children. It is true that when We speak to the newly wed Our words are addressed also to you; nevertheless We are glad to have this opportunity of speaking to you in a special way, dearly beloved

daughters, because We see in mothers, and in their expert and pious helpers, those who exert the earliest and the most intimate influence upon the souls of little ones and upon their growth in piety and virtue.

We need not delay to remind you how important and how necessary is this work of education in the home, and how grave a mother's obligation not to neglect it or perform it with indifference. Speaking as We are to our beloved daughters of Catholic Action We can have no doubt that they regard this obligation as the first of their duties as Christian mothers, and as a task in which none can fully take their place. But it is not enough to be conscious of an obligation and to have the desire to discharge it; it is necessary also to render oneself capable of discharging it competently.

THE NEED OF SERIOUS PREPARATION FOR THE DIFFICULT WORK OF EDUCATION

It is a curious circumstance and, as Pope Pius XI remarked in his Encyclical, a lamentable one, that whereas no one would dream of suddenly becoming a mechanic or an engineer, a doctor or a lawyer, without any apprenticeship or preparation, yet every day there are numbers of young men and women who marry without having given an instant's thought to preparing themselves for the arduous work of educating their children which awaits them. And yet, if St Gregory the Great could speak of the government of souls as 'the art of arts', surely no art is more difficult and strenuous than that of fashioning the souls of children, for those souls are so very tender, so easily disfigured through some thoughtless influence or wrong advice, so difficult to guide aright and so lightly led astray, more susceptible than wax to receive a disastrous and indelible impression through malignant influences or culpable neglect. Fortunate the child whose mother stands by its cradle like a guardian angel to inspire and lead it in the path of goodness! And so while We congratulate you upon what you have already achieved, We cannot but exhort you warmly and anew to develop those splendid organisations which are doing so much to provide for every rank and social class educators conscious of their high mission, in mind and bearing alert against evil and zealous to promote good. Such sentiments in a woman and a mother give her the right to that reverence and dignity which belong to a man's loyal helpmate; such a mother is like a pillar, for she is the central support of the home; she is like a beacon whose light gives an example to the parish and brings illumination to the pious associations of which she is a member.

THE MOTHER'S WORK OF TRAINING DURING INFANCY

Especially opportune are those organisations of your Union of Catholic Action which seeks to help and train the young wife before childbearing and during the infancy of her offspring. In this you are doing an angel's work, watching over the mother and the little one she bears within her, and then when the baby comes, standing by the cot to help the mother as with breast and smile she feeds body and soul of the tiny angel that heaven has sent her. To woman God has given the sacred mission, painful yet how joyous, of maternity; and to her too, more than to anyone else, is entrusted the first education of the child in its early months and years. Of heredity, which may exercise such an influence upon the future cast of a child's character, We will not speak-except to say that this hidden heritage sometimes points an accusing finger at the irregular life of the parents, who are thus gravely responsible for making it difficult for their offspring to lead a truly Christian life. Fathers and mothers, whose mutual love is sanctified by the faith of Christ, see that before your child is born you prepare a pure family atmosphere in which it may open its eyes to light and its soul to life, so that the good odour of Christ may linger about every step of its moral development.

Mothers, your sensibility is greater and your love more tender, and therefore you will keep a vigilant eye upon your babies throughout their infancy, watching over their growth and over the health of their little bodies, for they are flesh of your flesh and the fruit of your womb. Remember that your children are the adopted sons of God and specially beloved of Christ; remember that their angels look for ever on the face of the heavenly Father; and so you too as you rear them must be angels in like manner, in all your care and vigilance keeping your eyes fixed upon heaven. It is your task from the cradle to begin their education in soul as well as in body; for if you do not educate them they will begin, for good or ill, to educate themselves. Many of the moral characteristics which you see in the youth or the man owe their origin to the manner and circumstances of his first upbringing in infancy: purely organic habits contracted at that time may later prove a serious obstacle to the spiritual life of the soul. And so you will make it your special care in the treatment of your child to observe the prescriptions of a perfect hygiene, so that when it comes to the use of reason its

bodily organs and faculties will be healthy and robust and free from distorted tendencies. This is the reason why, except where it is quite impossible, it is most desirable that the mother should feed her child at her own breast. Who shall say what mysterious influences are exerted upon the growth of that little creature by the mother upon whom it depends entirely for its development!

Have you observed those little eyes, wide open, restlessly questioning, their glance darting from this thing to that, following a movement or a gesture, already expressing joy or pain, anger and obstinacy, and giving other signs of those little passions that nestle in the heart of man even before the tiny lips have learned to utter a word? This is perfectly natural. Notwithstanding what certain thinkers have maintained, we are not born endowed with knowledge or with the memories and dreams of a life already lived. The mind of the child as it comes forth from its mother's womb is a page upon which nothing is written; from hour to hour as it passes on its way from the cradle to the tomb its eyes and other senses, internal and external, transmit the life of the world through their own vital activity, and will write upon that page the images and ideas of the things among which it lives. Hence an irresistible instinct for truth and goodness turns the simple soul that nothing knows upon the things of sense; and all these powers of feeling, all these childish sensations, by way of which mind and will come gradually to their awakening, need to be educated, trained, carefully guided, otherwise the normal awakening and proper direction of these noble faculties of the spirit will be compromised and distorted. From that early age a loving look, a warning word, must teach the child not to yield to all its impressions, and as reason dawns it must learn to discriminate and to master the vagaries of its sensations; in a word, under the guidance and admonition of the mother it must begin the work of its own education.

Study the child in his tender age. If you know him well you will educate him well; you will not misconceive his character; you will come to understand him, knowing when to give way and when to be firm; a naturally good disposition does not fall to the lot of all the sons of men.

THE TRAINING OF THE MIND

Train the mind of your children. Do not give them wrong ideas or wrong reasons for things; whatever their questions may be, do not answer them with evasions or untrue statements which their minds rarely accept; but take occasion from them lovingly and patiently to train their minds, which want only to open to the truth and to grasp it with the first ingenuous gropings of their reasoning and reflective powers. Who can say what many a genius may not owe to the prolonged and trustful questionings of a childhood at the home fireside!

THE TRAINING OF THE CHARACTER

Train the character of your children. Correct their faults, encourage and cultivate their good qualities and co-ordinate them with that stability which will make for resolution in after life. Your children, conscious as they grow up and as they begin to think and will, that they are guided by a good parental will, constant and strong, free from violence and anger, not subject to, weakness or inconsistency, will learn in time to see therein the interpreter of another and higher will, the will of God, and so they will plant in their souls the seeds of those early moral habits which fashion and sustain a character, train it to self-control in moments of crisis and to courage in the face of conflict or sacrifice, and imbue it with a deep sense of Christian duty.

THE TRAINING OF THE HEART

Train their hearts. Frequently the decision of a man's destiny, the ruin of his character, or a grave danger threatening him, may be traced to his childish years when his heart was spoiled by the fond flattery, silly fussing, and foolish indulgence of misguided parents. The impressionable little heart became accustomed to see all things revolve and gravitate around it, to find all things yielding to its will and caprice, and so there took root in it that boundless egoism of which the parents themselves were later to become the first victims! All this is often the just penalty of the selfishness of parents who deny their only child the joy of having little brothers and sisters who, sharing in the mother's love, would have accustomed him to think of others besides himself. What deep and rich potentialities for love, goodness, and devotion lie dormant in the heart of a child! You, mothers, must awaken them, foster them, direct them, raise them up to Him, who will sanctify them, to Jesus; to Jesus, and to Mary, their heavenly Mother, who will

open the child's heart to piety, will teach it by prayer to offer its pure sacrifices and innocent victories to the divine Lover of little ones; she will teach it to feel compassion for the poor and unhappy. How joyous is the springtime of childhood, unruffled by wind or storm!

THE TRAINING OF THE WILL IN ADOLESCENCE

But the day will come when the childish heart will feel fresh impulses stirring within it; new desires will disturb the serenity of those early years. In that time of trial, Christian mothers, remember that to train the heart means to train the will to resist the attacks of evil and the insidious temptations of passion; during that period of transition from the unconscious purity of infancy to the triumphant purity of adolescence you have a task of the highest importance to fulfil. You have to prepare your sons and daughters so that they may pass with unfaltering step, like those who pick their way among serpents, through that time of crisis and physical change; and pass through it without losing anything of the joy of innocence, preserving intact that natural instinct of modesty with which Providence has girt them as a check upon wayward passion. That sense of modesty, which in its spontaneous abhorrence from the impure is akin to the sense of religion, is made of little account in these days; but you, mothers, will take care that they do not lose it through indecency in dress or self-adornment, through unbecoming familiarities or immoral spectacles; on the contrary you will seek to make it more delicate and alert, more upright and sincere. You will keep a watchful eye on their steps; you will not suffer the whiteness of their souls to be stained and contaminated by corrupt and corrupting company; you will inspire them with a high esteem and jealous love for purity, advising them to commend themselves to the sure and motherly protection of the Immaculate Virgin. Finally, with the discretion of a mother and a teacher, and thanks to the open-hearted confidence with which you have been able to inspire your children, you will not fail to watch for and to discern the moment in which certain unspoken questions have occurred to their minds and are troubling their senses. It will then be your duty to your daughters, the father's duty to your sons, carefully and delicately to unveil the truth as far as it appears necessary, to give a prudent, true, and Christian answer to those questions, and set their minds at rest. If imparted by the lips of Christian parents, at the proper time, in the proper measure, and with the proper precautions, the revelation of the mysterious and marvellous laws of life will be received by them with reverence and gratitude, and will enlighten their minds with far less danger than if they learned them haphazard, from some disturbing encounter, from secret conversations, through information received from oversophisticated companions, or from clandestine reading, the more dangerous and pernicious as secrecy inflames the imagination and troubles the senses. Your words, if they are wise and discreet, will prove a safeguard and a warning in the midst of the temptations and the corruption which surround them, "because foreseen an arrow comes more slowly."

THE POWERFUL AID OF RELIGION

But in this great work of the Christian education of your sons and daughters you well understand that training in the home, however wise, however thorough, is not enough. It needs to be supplemented and perfected by the powerful aid of religion. From the moment of baptism the priest possesses the authority of a spiritual father and a pastor over your children, and you must cooperate with him in teaching them those first rudiments of catechism and piety which are the only basis of a solid education, and of which you, the earliest teachers of your children, ought to have a sufficient and sure knowledge. You cannot teach what you do not know yourselves. Teach them to love God, to love Christ, to love our Mother the Church and the pastors of the Church who are your guides. Love the catechism and teach your children to love it; it is the great handbook of the love and fear of God, of Christian wisdom and of eternal life.

VALIANT HELPERS IN THE WORK OF EDUCATION

In your work of education, which is many-sided, you will feel the need and the obligation of having recourse to others to help you: choose helpers who are Christians like yourselves, and choose them with all the care that is called for by the treasure which you are entrusting to them: you are committing to them the faith, the purity, and the piety of your children. But when you have chosen them you must not think that you are henceforth liberated from your duty and your vigilance., you must cooperate with them. However eminent school teachers may be in their profession they will have little success in the formation of the character of your children without your collaboration-still less if instead

of helping and lending support to their efforts you were to counteract and oppose them. What a misfortune it would be if at home your indulgence and fond weakness were to undo all that has been done at school, at catechism, or in Catholic associations, to form the character and foster the piety of your children!

But some mothers may say-children are so difficult to manage nowadays! I can do nothing with that son of mine; that daughter of mine is impossible! Admittedly many boys and girls at the age of twelve or fifteen show themselves intractable. But why? Because when they were two or three years old they were allowed to do as they pleased. True, some temperaments are ungrateful and rebellious; but however unresponsive, however obstinate, he is still your child. Would you love him any the less than his brothers and sisters if he were sickly or deformed? God has given him to you; see that you do not treat him as the outcast of the family. No child is so unruly that he cannot be trained with care, patience, and love; and it will rarely happen that even the stoniest and most unpromising soil will not bear some flower of submission and virtue, if only an unreasonable severity does not run the risk of exterminating the seed of good will which even the proudest soul has hidden within it. The whole education of your children would be ruined were they to discover in their parents-and their eyes are sharp enough to see-any signs of favouritism, undue preferences, or antipathies in regard to any of them. For your own good and for the good of the family it must be clear that, whether you use measured severity or give encouragement and caresses, you have an equal love for all, a love which makes no distinction save for the correction of evil or for the encouragement of good. Have you not received them all equally from God ?

TEACHERS SIDE BY SIDE WITH CHRISTIAN MOTHERS

Our words have been addressed principally to you, Christian mothers. But with you we see around us today a gathering of nuns, teachers, and others engaged in the work of Christian education. They are mothers too, not by nature or by blood but by the love which they bear to the young, who are so dear to Christ and to His Bride the Church. Yes, you too are mothers, you who work side by side with Christian mothers in the work of education; for you have a mother's heart, burning with the charity which the Holy Spirit has poured out in you. In this charity, which is the charity of Christ that presses you on the path of well-doing, you find your light, your comfort, and the work that brings you so close to mothers, fathers, and children. You gather together these living branches of society, these children who are the hope of their parents and of the Church, and form them into a great family of thousands and thousands of little ones; you develop the training of their minds, characters, and hearts, bringing them up in a spiritual and moral atmosphere in which the joyousness of innocence appears side by side with faith in God and reverence for holy things, with a sense of duty towards parents and country. Our praise and gratitude, joined with the thanks of all mothers, go out to you in full measure. In your schools, homes, colleges, and associations you emulate and continue the mother's work of training. You are truly a sisterhood of spiritual mothers whose offspring is the pure flower of youth.

CONCLUSION

Christian mothers and beloved daughters, of your incomparable mission-fraught in these days with so many difficulties and obstacles-We have been able only briefly to describe the glories. What a majestic figure is that of the mother in the home as she fulfils, her destiny at the cradle side, the nurse and teacher of her little ones! Hers is truly a task full of labour, and We should be tempted to deem her unequal to it were it not for the grace of God which is ever at hand to enlighten, direct, and sustain her in her daily anxieties and toil; were it not, too, for those other educators, mother-like in spirit and energy, whom she calls to aid her in the formation of these youthful souls. Imploring God to fill you to overflowing with His graces and to give increase to your manifold labours on behalf of the young entrusted to you, We grant you from Our heart, as a pledge of heavenly favours, Our fatherly Apostolic Benediction.
