

THE CATHOLIC PROBLEM OF EVACUATION

A Personal Experience

I AM not attempting to discuss here the wider problems of evacuation taken in its most general sense. The general scheme and its results have come in for much adverse criticism both in the secular press and in our catholic papers. It seems only fair, then, that one should give some of the good effects where one has found them. Of course it is only in the normal order of things that first things come first with Catholics. So we make no apology for the fact that in the case of children evacuated from our catholic schools it is with their religious welfare that we are primarily concerned. Not that we think the material welfare of the child to be unimportant. It is merely considered in its proper place. For convenience I shall, however, take this less important aspect first.

The evacuees came from the danger areas, namely the large industrial cities with their congested conditions of life, and from crowded seaports. Such places are unhealthy not only in war time, and for fear of German bombers. When one thinks, then, of the money that is spent in an ever-increasing amount, year by year, in peace time, in bringing children from the worst of such areas into the healthy surroundings of seaside or countryside; and that the evacuation scheme did this very thing on a wholesale scale—for all children, and not merely for a week or two, but indefinitely—it seems evident from this, the point of view of national health and fitness, that the scheme deserved more support from the public generally. We must not be unsympathetic with the parents who suddenly found home life destroyed by the removal of their children. But since in the majority of cases the children now in the country had fresh air, sunshine (in season), more varied and healthier food, and better home surroundings gener-

ally, more patience and self-denial could have been exercised on the side of the parents.

I am afraid that what Mr. Denis Gwynn says in his fine article on this subject (*Catholic World*, March, 1940) was only too true in many cases, namely that 'the absence of cinemas and fried-fish shops and of bags of cheap sweets was a grievance which made many parents insist on bringing their children home.' In the particular case of the London children with which I have been in constant contact from the beginning, their health has visibly improved; they came through the severity of the winter with remarkably little sickness; and they have been from the outset definitely contented and happy. About two-thirds of the original number still remain.

Now to lead up to the religious welfare of the children a few words should be said on what might seem to be the general effect of living in the country on their characters and moral tone. I must say most emphatically that what surprised me was how remarkably good and naturally pure-minded these children are. If their religion has been able to do this for them in the unfavourable environment of sordid city life, where vice imprints itself on the very faces of people and the aspect of places, how much more, when their surroundings also help to uplift and refine them? Instead of the stuffy cinemas, where they learn so much of the evils of life; instead of the grimy streets and drab backyard they had in the autumn, and are about to have now, the beauties of nature in all her glory—the lovely English countryside; walks through the lanes and the wooded hills; the wild flowers and the birds and the trees. Nature-study, which meant little to them but books and coloured pictures, has suddenly become a living thing of absorbing interest. And they *are* genuinely attracted and interested. We need not develop the point of what an influence all this is having on their character and outlook, and what good effect it must have on their future.

On the religious side there is a twofold viewpoint,

namely as regards the children themselves and as regards their effect on the reception area. One might be tempted to say that the first is of much more importance than the second. But is it? In the short run perhaps; but in the long run perhaps not. The great Irish famine, and the consequent wholesale immigration to England, was in itself a major disaster. But we know that the 'second Spring' of Catholicism in England was in the long run a far greater good than the apparent evil to so many individual Catholics of being torn from their Catholic families and Catholic surroundings to be thrown unprotected amidst hostile Protestantism.

Some such dispersal, but in a lesser degree, and under milder conditions has now happened through evacuation. The strongholds of Catholicism are the large cities and the seaports, where the working-class abound. Thus many cases of evacuation have been similar to this one of which I write from first-hand knowledge. Catholic children (some 150 in this case), with their teachers, and rather to the consternation of the latter, found themselves suddenly marooned in a wholly non-Catholic district, where naturally the most primitive and narrow-minded ideas still persisted in regard to Catholics and Catholic practices. The inhabitants with their sturdy patriotism accepted this incursion of Catholic children into their homes and villages, as they felt bound to accept any of the evils of war that might afflict them. Even in that frame of mind the children were treated with the greatest kindness and hospitality. To-day I can say that the 'locals' have had a very liberal education in what Catholics are, how they behave normally, and, above all, what, or rather how much, their religion means to them.

Many of the better-class people who have had to do with billeting and other arrangements have very frankly admitted that their whole outlook in regard to Catholics has been changed. The ordinary country folk have been both puzzled and impressed. But they would not be even

puzzled unless their prejudices were being in some measure upset. Prejudices they are which die hard. Thus, one man could contain himself no longer when he found his guests persisting on going out fasting on Sunday mornings even amidst the worst conditions of snow and ice. 'These Roman Catholics are like Indian fakirs; they enjoy self-torture.' Then quite illogically, 'I bet the priest has a good rum and milk before he goes out.' Surely a good instance of how impossible they find it to translate the Catholic sense of religious values into anything corresponding in their own beliefs.

In this district then, as in so many others, Masses, two each Sunday and one during the week, are being said for the first time since the Reformation. Priests go backward and forward, and even the religious habit has been seen about the streets. Sunday mornings have had to be somewhat rearranged because a little Catholic guest insists on being called early to go to Mass, and then does not want even a cup of tea before going out, and only gets breakfast an hour or so later. Then there is all the business of children going out at other special times to go to confession. They didn't realise before that children went to confession. It is a bit difficult to reconcile with the old notion that Catholics have to pay to have their sins forgiven: for these are very poor children. Then there are holydays of obligation: as if it wasn't enough to go so regularly Sunday after Sunday! Yet they are fond of these children who are so docile and well behaved; the place has been the better for their coming, and they will be genuinely sorry when they go. Very much more in the same strain could be given. It has all made me feel that at least from this point of view, and in this place at any rate, evacuation can claim a good credit balance.

But has not all this been at the expense of the individual child's religion? I would say definitely, no. To begin with there is not one of the essentials of their religious life that they have lacked. The attendance at Mass is one hun-

dred per cent., which it never is at home. Many regular Mass-missers have thus become regular attenders. And just as the bad habit, contracted through bad example in the home, kept them away, the good habits they are now forming, and the good example they are getting, will perhaps persist when they return. One also feels that their religion has become a much more real and personal thing for them. The danger of doing things through routine is much less; so much has to be left to their own initiative. In fact they have had a thorough training in doing things themselves, and standing more on their own feet, which is so necessary for the out-of-school child. This is something, as all who have had experience know, hard to develop in the ordinary school system.

When Mass is devoutly attended to without the helpful surroundings of the Church, the child does begin to realise more that 'it is the Mass that matters.' It is the same with their confessions. Opportunity dictates the place and the time. Unconsciously they learn the meaning of the theological dictum, *Sacramenta propter homines*. I am sure they have come to appreciate better the fundamental and practical truth, that, given a priest with his power to absolve, all that is necessary for receiving the grace of the sacrament is their own earnest wish and good-will. Even when their preparation was made kneeling out on the lawn, or in a drab hall or elsewhere, it merely emphasised the simple faith which one saw reflected in their faces, and knew was in their hearts as they knelt before God's representative.

I admit that this is but one, and that a most favourable example of evacuation. I have just listened to a Bishop speaking about less fortunate cases. Yet one still found something of the same good elements present; and in the really bad cases one wondered whether it was really a problem of evacuation or not rather the problems of home and city conditions being exposed in the light of evacuation.

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