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Gregorio Hernandez Jr.

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The Problem of Human Erosion¹

GREGORIO HERNANDEZ JR.

I

IF we can judge from advertisements and from the labels on many a can and jar, there seems to be a preoccupation among food manufacturers to homogenize most of the things they prepare for our food and drink. We have homogenized peanut butter and homogenized cheese and homogenized milk and homogenized soup. I have been wondering with a bit of dread whether some sad day they will serve us homogenized *lechón* at a fiesta dinner! That will indeed be a sad day, for homogenization is the process of reducing a quantity of material to a uniform structure and consistency so that we cannot distinguish one part from another.

Now in a free and democratic society like ours where we try by various private and public agencies to provide some kind of school education for all the youth, there is danger that we make the futile attempt by something of a homogenized process of schooling to achieve the undesirable result of a homogenized people. Whatever may be said for or against homogenized foods, we cannot achieve and we do not want a homogenized people to constitute the society in which we live. Simply because a man is a man, a person, he cannot be reduced

¹ Paper read at the Seminar on Home and Community Education conducted under the auspices of the Ateneo de Cagayan at Cagayan de Oro City, 23-25 November 1956. Mr. Hernandez, Secretary of Education, was killed with President Magsaysay in a plane crash, 17 March 1957, two days after this article was sent to press.—Editor.

to either material or spiritual sameness with his fellows and it would be disastrous to our nation to attempt to do so.

Education is or should be the preparation of a man for what he must be and what he must do in this life, all of which of course is ordered for his future life. This process of preparation is primarily the responsibility of the family. This preparation however, particularly for the life a man must lead in our present state of society, cannot normally be accomplished by any one family. It is a process which also requires that cooperative effort whose instrument is a school. It is with the phase of education that belongs to schools that we are concerned here.

Among other things, a man must be a citizen and his education should prepare him to be a good citizen, adequately equipped to fulfill his civic obligations. For this reason the authority of the state or nation can (in the words of Pope Pius XI in his Encyclical Letter of 31 December 1929 on the Christian Education of Youth) "exact and take measures to secure that all its citizens have the necessary knowledge of their civic and political duties and a certain degree of physical, intellectual and moral culture which, considering the conditions of our times, is really necessary for the common good."

Of course it must be admitted that much of the fundamental schooling necessary to achieve this objective will and should have a rather homogenous structure. But this fundamental minimum which must be given to all will not adequately prepare each one for what he must be and do in this life. No man is an isolated unit but by his very nature must be a member of society and must live in society. A society is a moral union of persons, each with his own skills, talents and variety of natural and acquired abilities which he contributes in cooperation with others to meet the common needs of all.

To put this in the concrete: not everyone is or can or should be a priest or a statesman or a doctor or a lawyer or a storekeeper or a farmer or a mechanic or a street-cleaner. But each of these offices must be performed by someone. In other words: there is in the nation, in each province and in each local

community, a great variety of tasks to be performed if we are to have the benefits of that peace and prosperity for which we live in society. There is some work for everyone and it is important for his own and the community's good that each one perform the work which he can and should do in the actual social situation in which he is.

II

All this is obvious. The truth which is complementary to this should be equally obvious but it is too often ignored by the young and by their elders who have the responsibility to provide for them and to guide them.

The complementary truth is simply this: there is not and there never can be actual opportunities for the vast majority of our people to perform those functions in society which need only be performed by comparatively few. To put this in more practical terms: At any one time there can only be one President of the Philippines, a few senators, a few more congressmen. There is need of and there are opportunities for comparatively only a few doctors and lawyers and engineers and others in the so-called professional avocations.

Now what is the significance of this truth in the field of education, especially popular education? When the educational opportunities which are offered to the *vast majority* of our people are of a type suited to prepare them for the professions or the equivalent of the professions, then our educational facilities are not meeting the real needs of our people nor are these facilities serving the real good of the society in which our people live.

There are comparatively few opportunities for personal success or for careers of worth to our nation in the professions or the equivalent of the professions. Yet if the *majority* of our young people are being trained in an educational system which is designed only for these few positions, we are practically preparing the majority of our youth for frustration and failure. This is hardly the democratic ideal. It would mean that we are preparing the majority for a goal which they can never at-

tain and we are neglecting to prepare men and women for those functions which they *can* perform successfully in terms of personal happiness and social usefulness.

Education, both in the home and in the school, should be the instrument to unlock a full life to a free people. We are not using this instrument wisely if we are opening for the millions narrow doors through which only a few can pass. We are offering to the minds and hearts of thousands, perhaps millions, a promise which can be fulfilled for only a few. We are allowing our young people to waste their precious formative years in preparation for opportunities which most of them will never get and for functions which most of them will never be able to perform. At the same time we are leaving them mentally, morally and emotionally unequipped for the multitude of tasks which they can and should do. We are training them to compete in a contest where the prizes are only for a few. We are directing them into a conflict in which a few can win at the price of the dead hopes and frustrations of the many. This is scarcely the cooperative effort for the common good which should be characteristic of social effort.

III

One of the acknowledged benefits of a democratic society, which we want ours to be, is equality of opportunity for everyone. We acknowledge no social classes stratified by birth or by the economic status of one's parents. There should be opportunity for everyone who has the moral and intellectual and physical ability for positions of high responsibility in the government and in the professions to develop that ability to the utmost. In our society we want the positions of responsibility to be held and the professions practiced by those who are best able to do so, no matter what the social or economic status of their parents may have been. For that reason we do want schools and colleges which prepare youth to be leaders in government, the professions, business and so on. These schools and colleges should be very, very good. The point is: this type of school and college should not be the *only* source

of educational opportunities offered to the young men and women of our nation.

Just how much of the educational process of preparation for other pursuits can be accomplished in schools, how much in shops or fields, is another problem into which we cannot enter in this address. But we say again: such educational opportunities must be developed and offered if we would be honest to all the boys and girls of our nation and these types of educational facilities should be as perfect in their line as the education offered in the schools and colleges which prepare men for the professions.

To achieve this goal of affording educational opportunities which are real opportunities to all our youth, one of our chief tasks will be to get the majority of our people to take a realistic and honest view of the situation. There have been times—not only in our own country—when for the most part formal school education was possible only for the sons and daughters of the legal nobility and of the wealthy. Naturally the type of education offered was designed to prepare those boys and girls for the kind of life they would lead. When free and democratic standards came to prevail, opportunities for education were supposed to be open to all persons with no limitation of social class or wealth; but all too often the kind of education offered to the majority was the type suitable for only the few.

IV

Too often also school and college education has been considered not as a means of developing better men and women in their own community but as an escape mechanism by which the bright and vigorous few from among the masses could get away from the lowly classes into which they were born to join the so-called elite of the nation. How many poor farmers have starved themselves and sold their precious land to send their sons and daughters to college precisely that these sons and daughters might escape the drudgery and the tedium of the farm! Too often they escape the tedium of the farm only to be trapped in the squalor of a city slum.

This attitude is basically unrealistic and antisocial. And it represents a problem with which we as educators and leaders of the people are directly and immediately concerned. It is the problem that I refer to as the problem of human erosion.

This problem has two aspects—one quantitative and the other qualitative. Quantitatively, human erosion is the wearing away of the rural population—the trek of people from the rural communities to the cities, particularly to Manila. Qualitatively, it is the wearing away of human values within the rural community itself.

This exodus has grown sufficiently large to threaten our rural economy and consequently the very stability of our nation. This is especially true if we consider not so much absolute numbers of migrants but rather the high percentage of young men and women of leadership qualities who have torn their roots from the soil and definitively cast their lot with the urban dwellers. Captivated by the apparent attractions of city life, they lose their taste for rural living. And if they do perforce return to the country, they all too often act as “displaced persons,” out of sympathy with their environment, not exercising the rural leadership of which they are capable.

If we are to have a genuinely peaceful and prosperous nation, the greater number of our sons and daughters must be prepared not for goals which can be reached only by a few but for goals which can and must be reached by the majority. They should be educated not to escape the farms and communities in which they were born but most of them must be truly educated to make their own communities better functioning units in the overall society of our nation. They can and must realize that their own communities can by their efforts be made better places in which to live. They must be given the desire and the opportunity to prepare their souls and their bodies, their intellects and their wills and all their facilities, not for frustration but for realization in a life which they *can* make ever more full, a life of reasonable peace and

prosperity which God meant to be our way-station on the road to heaven.

And yet, does it not appear that perhaps our imposing university buildings and well-equipped plants are becoming ivory towers where so many of the youth who should be drawing forth the riches of our soil and forests and seas may seek temporary seclusion and escape from the realities of life? And when we consider that many college graduates find no employment in the professions and areas for which they are trained, does it not appear that we are giving a value to the diploma and the degree that is deleterious to our economy? Is the idolatry of the sheepskin or parchment paper worth the price of such waste of human resources?

V

More and more insistent is the claim dinned into our ears that the piece of sheepskin or parchment paper, so elaborately and painstakingly inscribed and which we hand out with such solemnity to our people on commencement day, has lost much of its luster in scholarship, in intellectual discipline, in moral integrity. And those of our educators who are willing to look beyond the textbook curtain of their pedagogical theories cannot have failed to sense the general feeling that this symbolic unit of currency in our educational system has suffered, if not an official, at least a popular but nonetheless regrettable devaluation. It is claimed that never before have so many diplomas meant so little education.

Surely, we must learn to value not a diploma but an education—an education that will make it possible for the youth to contribute to the enhancement of the values and the achievement of the goals established for the good of the nation and the economy. In this task the universities and colleges can and should play the major role by removing from the diploma its stigma as a badge of frustration, by restoring it to its pristine value as the symbol of real accomplishment, the reward for genuine talent and dedicated effort, the promise and the guarantee of useful service to God and to fellow Filipinos.

Our schools should therefore truly develop our youth to a full life, enriching their multiple capacities: their capacity for sharing the divine life of grace and an eternity in heaven, the capacity to develop intellectually, morally, esthetically, physically and socially.

Parents in sending their sons and daughters to school have the hope that they will be returned to them with their minds enlightened by truth and their wills fixed on the good. In brief they want their children developed and imbued with a set of attitudes, ideals and habits in keeping with the religious, cultural and social traditions of the Philippines. Simple hard-working fathers and mothers of all creeds who have had few educational advantages themselves have wished with all the means in their power to give their sons and daughters more opportunities than they themselves enjoyed, in the hope that thereby their children would be better citizens and escape the drudgery of life which has been their lot. They have trusted implicitly all who have been conducting schools whether these schools be private or public. Devoted fathers and mothers and patriotic citizens of every creed and walk of life have willingly borne their share of the yearly increasing tax burden for the schools in the firm belief that the greater the amount of money spent for education, the better must be tomorrow's citizens. For a generation our simple people have entertained the conviction and the hope that education will eventually be the corrective to all social evils and ultimately the solution of all our problems. For a generation they have felt the assurance that when elementary education became general, our citizens would be much better: and still better would our citizens be when every boy and girl enjoyed the opportunities of a high school and college education.

VI

Perhaps we who have established a fundamental democratic society and are blessed with a Christian culture can orientate our educational objectives and our educational methods more wisely if we fix our sights on the basic concept on which a Christian democracy should be founded and that is the true

dignity of every man. Every man is a person of dignity because he *is* a person. And we are reminded, every time we look at a crucifix, of a still greater title to dignity because Christ died for each man.

Christian democracy does not mean that all men are to be reduced to a common level measured by a least common denominator. Democracy means that every man is important, that every man is sacred. If we look at the whole of reality we can understand that a man's real dignity as a man does not come from his rank in the score-sheet of public notoriety nor from his profession but from the kind of a man he is, from the way he performs the work he has to do in the society in which he lives. Especially in a democracy we need the virtue of humility by which we can accurately esteem our own worth in relation to God and to our neighbors who are fellow citizens.

Blessed as we are with our Christian culture, we have the personal example of the two most important people who ever walked this earth. One was Our Lord Who is God-become-Man, and the other is His Immaculate Mother who is the Patroness of the Philippines. Their actual dignity we can never measure, yet Our Lord lived that dignity as a very good carpenter in the community of a small village, and Our Lady who is the Queen of Heaven and Earth fulfilled the high and holy function of a housewife in that same village. In the words of a poet, "all services rank the same with God. . . God's puppets best and worst are we; there is no last nor first."

THE OREGON SCHOOL CASE

Under the doctrine of *Meyer vs. Nebraska*, 262 U.S. 390, we think it entirely plain that the act of 1922 unreasonably interferes with the liberty of parents and guardians to direct the upbringing and education of children under their control. As often heretofore pointed out, rights guaranteed by the Constitution may not be abridged by legislation which has no reasonable relation to some purpose within the competency of the state. The fundamental theory of liberty upon which all governments in this Union repose excludes any general power of the state to standardize its children by forcing them to accept instruction from public teachers only. The child is not the mere creature of the state; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right coupled with the high duty to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations.

Supreme Court of the United States
1 June 1925, no. 583