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Theology for Sisters

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Father Horacio de la Costa, S.J., Mrs. B. R. Baker, Earl Carroll, Newland Baldwin, Charles Robert Butler, R. W. Pockmire. It was hoped that this bi-national membership of the Board would provide a representative cross-section of Philippine-American cultural activities.

DALMACIO MARTIN

Theology for Sisters

Last Ascension Thursday in Baguio His Excellency the Apostolic Nuncio to the Philippines (Archbishop Siino) conferred on some thirty Sisters diplomas testifying to their successful completion of a four-summer course in theology. The school which they attended is affiliated with the Regina Mundi Pontifical Institute established in Rome by the Sacred Congregation for Religious to promote the more perfect formation of Sisters in the sacred sciences.

The school has been functioning quietly and efficiently for the past four summers with a total enrollment of about 90 Sisters, drawn from at least twenty different religious congregations working in the Philippines. Its aim is to give the Sisters as solid a foundation as possible in theology to enrich both their own personal lives and their teaching apostolate. Since many of the Sisters have already acquired degrees in various branches of education and are veterans of the classroom, they come to the summer courses with the background that enables them to profit from a course necessarily crowded with rich matter.

The Baguio Summer School is part of a world-wide movement fostered and encouraged by Rome to bring Sisters into contact with the original sources of theology. Canon Law provides specific legislation in great detail for the intellectual formation of the clergy but is almost silent on the intellectual formation of Sisters. Working out an analogy of law, modern writers are starting to spell out the ideal plan to be followed from postulancy onwards which would enable Sisters to work for academic degrees in accordance with their talents. The Sisters themselves, as is only right, are among the leaders in the movement, especially those Sisters who have had the advantages of higher studies in various fields. It is hoped that what was once extraordinary in the intellectual formation of Sisters will become routine procedure.

The course given in Baguio included as background matter four units in Philosophy and one in Sociology. The remainder of the

thirty-two units were distributed among the usual theological subjects: Apologetics, Dogma, Moral, Canon Law, Ascetical Theology, Sacred Scripture, Church History, Liturgy, Catechetics, and Catholic Action. A formidable schedule to be crowded into six weeks in four summers after a full year of teaching! It is obviously not the ideal solution to the problem, but is the best that can be arranged under present conditions and, what is most important, a beginning which may serve to open the eyes of all to the rich treasures the Church would have her women religious explore and make part of their lives.

The ideal would seem to be to allow the Sisters four full years of training in a Catholic university to study theology with adequate library facilities, lectures, texts and, above all, time to study and reflect and absorb. An adequate testing program should reveal what Sisters are capable of profiting from such a course and the problem of time and money must be faced and solved with as much determination as was needed to solve the staggering problem of rehabilitation after the War. Modern writings on Sister formation marshal a formidable array of arguments to prove this thesis, arguments from those who know best—the Sisters themselves who have seen the old and the new. Today anyone who would oppose a better intellectual formation for the Sisters, on the plea that there is no time and no funds available, that schools are crying for more Sisters, etc., will find himself (or herself) singing *extra chorum*. A course such as that given in Baguio, bringing the Sisters in contact with the latest thinking on the formation of Sisters, opening their eyes to the wishes of Rome and the needs of the day, cannot help but breed a holy discontent with outdated procedures and policies.

"Adaptation" is a word that looms large in the ecclesiastical vocabulary of today, especially with regard to Sisters. Sisters and others have suddenly become articulate with regard to the inconveniences and handicaps attached to certain age-old traditions and customs. The cult of doing exactly what the Foundress did is slowly giving way to the more sensible policy of doing what the Foundress would do if she were alive today. The dress of Sisters, for example, is in many cases ill adapted to the modern automobile, telephone booth, taxi cab, physics laboratory and operating room. To transplant the dress and customs of a cold country to a tropical climate calls for adaptation if only for the sake of sheer survival. The Foundress is presumed to have had the vision that would make her the first one to legislate such adaptation. The substantials do not permit nor do they need adaptation but the accidentals that interfere with the substantials can and must go. It is the part of wisdom to know the difference between the two, but it is no virtue to insist on preserving for everyday modern life what should be relegated to the museum. Here, as so often is the case in century-old institutions, it is a matter

of "if the old but knew, and the young but could." Conservatism for the sake of conservatism is sometimes taken to be a virtue and innovation is strenuously resisted merely because it is innovation.

The Parable of the Talents applies to all, in and out of religion, to superiors as well as subjects. The talents that a Sister brings to the cloister are not to be buried and left unfruitful. For every one of us the words of Christ are appropriate: "All the more was it thy part to lodge my money with the bankers, so that I might have recovered it with interest when I came" (Mt. 25/27). To send a Sister into the classroom without the necessary preparation or to give her the intellectual preparation and then to make it morally impossible for her to use her talents properly due to an overcrowded schedule is to misuse God-given talents. This is a luxury we can ill afford in an age when the population is fast outdistancing vocations and every hand is needed at the oars and every talent has to be husbanded that it may produce a hundredfold.

Pius XII with his wonted vision opened up new horizons for the Sisters. They should be put on an equal footing with their colleagues in the world as far as their work is concerned. Let there be "no parsimony: take a broad and generous view." Once Sisters have acquired their professional training their superiors should make it possible for them to keep that professional training up to date. Refresher courses, seminars, conferences, access to the books and periodicals needed must all become part and parcel of the standard equipment of the Sister who is willing and able to do a professional job for Christ in the classroom.

The commentators have gone into great detail on this matter, with the Sisters themselves leading the way. A dependence on superiors that never leaves a Sister free to use her time according to her own mature supernatural judgment is a very dangerous and harmful kind of dependence. A schedule so crowded that only a giant able to dispense with rest and sleep could follow it without being harmed in body or soul; a life so cloistered as to foster ignorance of even the most important world events; a summer without a vacation, packed with extra classes and a retreat, and ending in a frenzied rush back to the classroom and the routine of another year—these and similar customs and attitudes have to change if Sisters are to succeed in their twentieth-century ministry and attract the modern girl to follow Christ.

There must be a division of labor so that the student Sister is left many uninterrupted hours to devote to her intellectual tasks. Modern technical progress must be placed at the service of virtue.

There are times, for instance, when a good intercom system would both save time and foster silence. Having an efficiency expert check the administration of schools might reveal overlapping, wasted effort, and the need for time-saving machinery and a good filing system to save needless wear and tear on the nerves of the Sisters. It might lead to the discovery that a highly trained Sister is being wasted on a routine job. A capable laywoman could do it just as well, thus leaving the Sister free for the more creative work for which she was trained.

For some of the older generation there might be a conflict in conscience between their traditional way of training Sisters and the modern atomic-age approach. This could be due to a latent anti-intellectualism, a fear that humility will suffer, that "increased education of Sisters will make obedience more difficult, perhaps even unsure." This is selling our modern Sisters very short and only reveals the weaknesses in the earlier type of training, in which false pedagogy and false psychology too often joined forces with doctrinal error to stultify the intellect by which we are made in the image of God, while developing an unhealthy dependence on Superiors and on sense-satisfying devotions. Kept at this level the Sisters could never experience the spiritual and intellectual growth they need. They could never fulfill the obligation pointed out by Pius XII to "progress from the spontaneous faith of children and simple souls to the full and reflective assimilation of the integral Christian message and all of its demands."

In Baguio the torch was lit and the first graduates have gone forth to every corner of the Philippines, aware of the immense treasures discovered, the veins left unmined, the libraries waiting to be read. They have come to realize that like all knowledge theology "maketh a bloody entrance." It is always hard for the pioneers and it should be much easier for those who follow after and the next generation should profit immensely from the lessons learned, the virtues practiced, the knowledge acquired. Perhaps these pioneers will, in the course of time, help to bring it about that the next generation at least will not have to crowd their theology into a six-week summer but will be able to take it in a leisurely course at College with all the advantages that implies, especially with regard to books, library facilities, and time to reflect and absorb. Then our Sisters will be able, without superhuman sacrifices, to "progress to the full and reflective assimilation of the integral Christian message and all of its demands."