

## SPEECH OF CONSTANT VAN CROMBRUGGHE AT PRIZEGIVING, ALOST, SUMMER 1815

Enlightened by sad experience, we are beginning to recognise today the defective nature of modern education. Parents complain that, in spite of their best efforts to bring up their children well the end result so little corresponds to their expectations that they feel guilty that they have achieved nothing. A light coating of knowledge is considered quite enough, as is a superficial knowledge of the language of the savants; a worldly spirit - that, in fact is the usual result of so much care and sacrifice. In vain does one seek in today's youth docility, modesty, submission, deference for those who have the most right to demand it: a mixture of stubbornness and vanity, vicious traits, an opinionated character, a great aversion to work, a fickle heart - this is how we see most young people today at the end of their education.

Where does such a pernicious disorder, which affects both parents and society, come from? The cause is obvious to anyone with a judicious and penetrating eye: it is because one is concerned only with cultivating the mind and memory of young people and no care is taken over their moral: it is because teachers, concerned only with knowledge and belles-lettres care little for inculcating in them the principles of religion: it is because piety, the foundation and first fruit of education - because without it the finest qualities often serve only to make man more licentious and impious - has been too much neglected, mistrusted and forgotten in education.

So, to achieve the perfection of which he is capable, man needs to be cultivated: the finest traits do not achieve their full worth in he who possesses them except by the care he takes to make them worthwhile and by the good use to which he puts them. Thus of all the means of bringing man to this perfection the most certain and the most sweet is to lead him there through religion. To achieve a real and useful value from his fine traits, and to ensure a good use for them for society, the most successful way is to lead his heart to virtue by the influence of piety. In this I am assured of the support of the best writers on education; I will, however, invoke only the evidence of reason and experience. If I were to need anything else I would find it strongly expressed by the zeal of those Belgians who so carefully seek to find for their children those houses of education where religion enjoys its full rights. We are aware of the horror which they have shown for those institutions, so opposed to their values and to their religion, which foreigners have tried to impose on us these past twenty-five years. We have seen parents place their children far from home, even themselves suffering banishment and the plundering of their possessions, rather than sending them to Bonaparte's schools.

I will consider education under its two essential elements, that is concerning the heart and the mind, and we will see that religious education is the only form of education capable of giving full scope to man's intellectual faculties, of directing and bringing to perfection the good qualities of the heart and, consequently, that only religious education can attain that goal which man seeks in education and which society has the right to expect from it.

The comparison which I will try to establish between Christian education and that where religion is ignored will put each one in a position to judge, by a comparison of methods and results, which one of the two will carry the day.

Among the numerous elements which are essential to the success of the education of the mind one must put in pride of place the application of the pupil, the spirit of order which is inspired in him, and the care taken by the teacher. Certainly, one of the principal and indispensable requirements for study, and without which all the others are almost worthless, is the spirit of recollection, that calm which restricts the light and capricious imagination of youth. Without this application, in vain will your pupils possess the best traits of character, in vain will God have bestowed on him all the gifts of the mind: they will remain sterile in the wilderness, since even the most fertile field produces nothing without careful culture. The passions, as a Belgian writer has so rightly written, trouble the soul, distract the mind with numerous desires and obstructions: they take it up with a love of the illusions which it pursues and places even the greatest obstructions to the progress of talent and human knowledge. Piety lifts these obstacles; through its divine ways it lifts man onto solid ground by settling the troubles of his soul, and by its active practices it calms the frivolity of childhood, it nourishes the mind by the contemplation of higher things and raises it up by those motives which are appropriate for interesting it and inspiring in it nobility and strength.

There are, I am convinced, some pupils who are naturally favoured by nature and for whom work is a necessity, and whose most treasured moments are those spent in study; but their number is very few! Most have need of an incentive, of something to attach them to work. And who could not see that piety is that attachment par excellence, that spur which engenders in young people the inestimable benefit of a taste for order and application? If you need convincing, go into one of those houses of education where piety in no way makes its sweet and salutary influence felt. What confusion meets the eye! What dissipation, what inconceivable frivolity among the pupils! Constraint is a martyrdom for them and their minds, the plaything of a thousand trifles, reject any serious application. If there are any who seem more occupied, they will often be those of a reserved nature, buried in their subjects, whom nothing touches, nothing rouses from their profound lethargy and who, deprived of the powerful help needed to receive any happy stimulation, never conquer the difficulties of study.

This explains, in these apathetic souls, those frivolous tastes which allow them to occupy themselves in the most serious manner with trifles. Place these same pupils in a house where religion presides at every exercise; where they are

repeatedly told that darkness of spirit is pernicious and malign, that ignorance nourishes sloth, that fruitful mother of all vices. One whose unconcern leaves others cold, another whose liveliness seems to vex even the most enduring patience; these have not turned their minds to religion, and known true piety, thereby forgetting their natural tendencies and being surprised to find themselves totally changed from what they were before. Come into these places consecrated to study, in these sanctuaries of belles-lettres; what order, what silence, what application reign! This is the fruit of the piety which we have inspired in the pupils, since it is the wonderful power of piety which allows children to discover a taste for application. The most pious children are usually the most learned, because they regard study as one of their most essential duties, and they know that God will make it an endless merit for them. From this fundamental advantage which education gets from piety, let me go onto some detail.

Study of the learned languages has for some centuries given our country a distinguished place in ancient literature, but this has declined noticeably since a sophistic philosophy, wishing to bring back the era of barbarism, came to destroy our schools, those great monuments to the knowledge and wisdom of our ancestors, but whose shining light pained the wild glances of impiety. It is, therefore, to this modern taste, as opposed to healthy literature as to piety, that we can attribute this decadence. This taste is based on two things which seemed incompatible with solid reason and pure, Belgian morality up until the present time. Now, in our time, false lights have found the secret of uniting frivolity, to which one dedicates oneself too much these days to combat the boredom of language study, to blind irreligion which, like certain malicious animals, lives only in the shadows, and finds its tomb on the enlightened eras of the annals of the world.

Religion overthrows and destroys these two obstacles: it inspires in its children a zeal for duty which supports them in their search for principles and a brave perseverance in the arid study of the mechanism of languages. Friend of the light which is its dearest element, Religion can never be dazzled by its shining. One knows what the study of ancient languages owes to Religion's pious and learned researches, since, in order to be certain of the long-standing of its sacred dogmas, it has traced it back, East and West, to its most early centuries. As proof of what I am saying I need do no more than to point out the immense labours that their zeal for the Religion of our forefathers inspired in the learned men of whom the nations are so proud.

The influence of piety in correcting, through education, weaknesses of the mind and in bringing to perfection the strivings of the heart, reaches out to all areas of literature. The heart, enlivened by the tender sentiments which Religion inspires, will benefit from the activity of the mind and the impetus of genius. Piety favours poetic genius which demands the maximum of verve and enthusiasm. Has profane antiquity anything in this genre to compare with the majesty and sublimity of the Psalms and Canticles of Religion? There is no area of the poetic art which piety, in harmony with reason, morals and natural disposition, cannot bring to perfection. This is provided that one can inspire the imagination without having recourse to those means which reason or Religion condemn; since the first rule is to safeguard morals, poetry will remove from its works any passion which is contrary to the holy severity of Christianity. Always the moral will be pure, the depiction modest, and the conclusion, without ceasing to be agreeable, will be useful and instructive.

Eloquence finds that the maxims of piety are perfectly in agreement with the precepts of the greatest masters of the art of Oratory. The essential virtues of the Orator - probity, strength, love of the common good, disinterest - receive from Religion a greater strength and reality. The goal of eloquence being to persuade, its rules can be better understood by those whose hearts are pure and who combine with their natural disposition the fine sentiments of Christian piety.

Let us be in no doubt that libertinage and impiety will complain of the constraint which piety puts on the imagination of the poet and of the historian, by the scrupulous exactitude which it imposes on the one, and by its insistence on banning, from the work of the other, everything which could give the slightest offence to purity of morals. Piety, fair from being embarrassed congratulates itself on deserving such a complaint, and fights for truth and the assurance of the rights of virtue and the ease of society.

So then, knowledge, having as a goal the discovery of the truth, is not a stranger to solid piety. Wisely jealous of time, freed from slavery to passion, pious knowledge gives to man in the midst of all his labours the freedom to embellish and enrich his mind.

But it is especially in the teacher himself that piety shows its powerful effect on education. A natural ability would not survive for long faced with the setbacks which one discovers at every pace in this difficult occupation. Religion must animate the teacher's mind, and inspire in him that devotion which can overcome all those obstacles which are that much more difficult, call for more sacrifice and offer less reward, without it. But how powerful is the language which Religion addresses to those whom it calls to this important function! "Be the guardian angels of the children who are entrusted to you" it says to them, "protect them against that iniquity which fills the world. Raise them for the Motherland, raise them for their parents, make them good sons, sincere friends, men of integrity; and to arrive at this take no heed of your own benefit, your rest or your health. Do not count on any recognition. Alas, men seldom appreciate true service and, even if they wanted to, could they do so worthily? A more noble prize is reserved for your labours and you will receive it from He who can appreciate everything. Besides, how greatly is the teacher rewarded by

the sight of attentive young men, avid for instruction, whose hearts are set on fire through reading some powerful passage! So, then, the teacher rises above himself, all his words engraving themselves in tongues of fire on the hearts of his pupils, leaving behind impressions which the years will never remove.

Do I need to say any more to illustrate the excellence of Religious education? Nevertheless its beneficial influence does not rest there; its triumph would be imperfect if we did not consider it in relation to society - that is where its triumph *par excellence* lies.

Moral education develops a love for and a habit of virtue, of good ways; it develops the generous affections of the soul and forms the character. So, then, religion, by its moral precepts and by the example of its founder conquers the strongest of natural tendencies, calms the hardest spirit, makes the least compliant will flexible and manageable; even bitterness is sweetened by its enchanting guile. How many pupils would have remained forever unsociable through their strange and capricious natures if they had not learned from piety self-control and the ability to live with their equals? This, in effect, is the spectrum of possibilities offered by Christian Education to reform, or rather to remould, nature. Could one even dare to compare this with Education where religion is not present? No, far from rebuilding the character, everything seems to conspire to destroy it. Let me put before you the experience of those parents whose sons, through the misfortunes of the times and when a despotic government decided everything, were condemned to an education cut off from the Belgian spirit. Not to mention the false ideas of grandeur that these children developed there, they contracted defects which most directly attack society: vanity and egoism, that poisoned fruit of the new doctrines, hardened them to all that nature shows us to be most sacred. Look, in fact, at certain young people today: at the age of ten they are full of their own small merit, already demanding applause; at fifteen they are arrogant, insufferable; at twenty they are perfect models of fatuousness, effrontery and impudence. Paternal authority, maternal tenderness - so powerful for us - for these thoughtless and guilty ones you are only vain names! Look at their haughty bearing, their studied gestures, their childish seeking after a frivolous elegance. In society, take note of their decisive tone, their *gravitas*, their serious pursuit of trifles and above all their efforts to demonstrate at every turn all the frippery of a cultured spirit. Even if they advance the most absurd propositions, be careful not to contradict them; the slightest doubt irritates them; they treat experience, reason and knowledge as prejudices of a former era. How good it would be if, even in their ridiculous propositions, they still respected anything concerning Religion! How different is the young man brought up with the principles of piety and wisdom. He is easy in his manners, frank in his discussions, polite and decent in his bearing. Without affectation, he shows no wish to be noticed; he is sensitive to what is done for him and the delicacy of his feelings brings him to show his gratitude. Through virtue he has a taste for that which others do only with difficulty and through vain ostentation. It is principally on the heart that pious Education has its most visible influence; it guides the sensitivity of the heart and cultivates in it the virtues of generosity and of charity.

Yes, it is from this source that is derived true sensitivity, that generous and compassionate virtue, that exquisite sentiment which binds man to man and opens his heart to all the needs of his equals. Fruit and companion of goodness of heart, source of the most pure joy, principle of all charitable qualities, this great virtue has not been banished from our Belgium! Victims of Waterloo, brave men who shed your noble blood for Europe, tell us if ever gratitude were to allow you to forget the charity and kindness of this generous nature? You will maintain these virtues, my dear Compatriots, as long as you have a horror of impious Education whose cold egoism concentrates man's affections on himself. It is for piety to teach us that all men are part of the same family and our consideration should extend itself to all its members.

Fathers and Mothers who have allowed yourselves to be dazzled by the *faux brillant* of new methods, you complain quite rightly that in your families you no longer see developing those sentiments whose loss you quite rightly regret. You complain of the coldness and insensitivity of your children, of the self-interested way in which they receive your most tender care. Do you really want to receive sincere and meaningful expressions of their filial love, so precious to you? Return to the wise and time honoured custom of your fathers, and entrust them to the care of those who put all of their own happiness into making them into true Christians. Then they will repay you with interest the gratitude they owe you; then you will be able to trust their words; their protestations of gratitude will be sincere because they will be dictated by the heart and by the heart alone. It is Religion which gives them the duty of honouring and loving the authors of their days, as well as of caring for them in their old age, and of never giving the slightest occasion of sadness or of pain.

So then, in these special cases where piety holds sovereign sway, virtue, unceasingly recommended, encouraged, and sustained by all sorts of means, plants deep roots in the hearts of the pupils. All that they see and hear leaves on their souls healthy impressions and fortifies their morals against the attacks of the times. Alas, our own times share in this shame, and I will be understood here by those honest souls who deplore the abuses which I also deplore. One has only too well made of education a way of corrupting the heart and mind of youth, of freezing it into an unhealthy indifference to everything concerning Religion. In the same way schools of letters and of morals has been made into schools of error, of rebellion and of impiety. Thus a school can become the coffin of their innocence if careful supervision does not prevent their unfortunate tendencies. How legitimate, therefore, is the care that Christian educators take to remove from the eyes of the pupils all those objects which might excite the passions, and to make them breathe the pure air of virtue, of innocence and of sound instruction! From this comes their care that everything in the colleges

teaches and inspires virtue: inscriptions, pictures, statues, even games, and that everything which attracts their eyes and ears may be a healthy breeze which penetrates, un-noticed, to the heart of the children and which, enriched by the discourses and yet more by the example of their masters, plants in their hearts from an early age social and Christian virtues. Furthermore, there are provided in these establishments a choice of books for the pleasure and use of the pupils, for fear that knowledge will lead them astray without enlightening them. Who could count the number of victims who are daily sacrificed to the demon of immorality by deadly writings! Principles harmful to all social order would not have taken root in the last fifty years to cause all the evils which have flooded the earth if one had reserved to Religion the inalienable rights that she enjoys over Education, and we would still enjoy today those joys, which centuries of piety ensured to our ancestors and to many of our contemporaries.

Finally, let me add that pious Education is the most capable of forming the mind of society. It is unnecessary for me to prove that it forestalls the evils which are its true scourges. The pious man knows how to avoid excesses of both misanthropy and of dissipation. As a charitable person, he does not feel himself to be authorised to cut himself off from other men by reason of their imperfections. A humble person, he does not have a misguided idea of his own merit which would make him see himself as superior to his equals, and he supports them out of the need he has to be supported by them. He knows how to raise and lower himself according to the nature of those who surround him, and to temper the rays of a light which might dazzle others. His heart being neither vicious nor depraved, his relationships will be full of that innocent charm and friendliness of wit which are the embellishment of society. No-one will be able to resist the enchantment of his gentleness, the justice of his reasoning, the elegant simplicity of his expression and above all his easy modesty which increases his merit.

How then, except in bad faith, could one refuse to Christian Education the crown which reason, experience and happiness in life conspire to award it? Let us say without fear of contradiction that only Religious Education is capable of leading man to the perfection of which he is capable and of assuring the happiness of the individual and of society.

Happy then is youth nourished at the source of so many benefits! Armed with the sentiments which Religion inspires, it sets forth on its career with the righteous hope of following it with glory. Once the heavenly flame of competition is lit in its heart, work, that heavy burden for the young, becomes sweet and light. A gesture of disapproval humbles a pupil stimulated by piety; a word brings his attention back to his work, a smile animates him, a mark of satisfaction charms him. Happy also is the college where these virtues hold sway. Pure joy animates every heart and spreads over the faces of all an air of happiness.

Belgians, be aware of our care and efforts for the education of your children. May your wishes in the matter enlighten our August Sovereign. He wishes your happiness, but sometimes the manner of achieving it is hidden from him. Wretched would we be if we were reduced, in this matter as in so many others, to repeating that plaintive but tardy cry "If only the King had known!!! If the King only knew!!!" Make no mistake, Religion and happiness of your children depend on your zeal in repulsing everything reminiscent in our Motherland of those schools where impiety and libertinage were taught along with knowledge. Remind yourself often of these words of Quintilian: If indeed it is resolved that schools are of benefit to study but that they are harmful to morals, a consideration for living virtuously would seem to me to be preferable to a consideration for speaking excellently.

Wonderful Youth! hope of your Motherland, pray to the God of your fathers that he may guard you from the worst of evils: that of Education where Religion and virtue are not at the very heart.

And you, oh good Prince, so worthy of hearing the truth. Permit a Belgian to express the wish of his countrymen: no plan for Education will succeed among us if our Religion is not assured its full rights in it. Our children will absolutely not take in the elements of all evil along with knowledge. Our just hatred for those establishments of this type which the French Government tried to establish in our country, and which were hardly attended except by foreigners, should show your Majesty the strength of opinion of the people that he is so desirous of making happy. If my zeal for the happiness of youth, if the sacrifices I have made for this most worthy part of your Majesty's subjects have given me some right to public recognition, I will be greatly rewarded by the happiness of bringing to the attention of my King something of such great importance and of having thereby contributed to the happiness of the Motherland. If I have any experience in this matter, I can say with the strongest conviction that the way to make Education all it should be is to make the Education of youth essentially Religious. If my feeble voice succeeds in reaching the Throne, I will congratulate myself for having succeeded in strengthening the ties between the people and their Sovereign, and of having re-awakened that hope which has been almost extinguished by the discouragement which has become so widespread in all areas of the State.

Not only does the prosperity of all kingdoms and peoples but also especially does the safety of the Christian State depend on the correct education of the young; education indeed directs minds, when still unformed, to refinement; moreover it makes minds which are barren and unfruitful useful and suitable for the duties of the State: worship of God promotes loyalty to one's parents and country, and promotes respect and obedience towards the officers of the State.