

Notre Dame is a school founded by the Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. This society of religious women was founded in 1820 by Julie Billiart, a French peasant. It grew from a profound concern for girls who were destitute and deprived in the time after the French Revolution. At that time, Julie's concern was to provide young women with a means of livelihood and to share with them her appreciation of God's goodness.

Today, the education given in Notre Dame schools continues the work of this woman.

In the late 20th century providing young women (and men, too) with the means of livelihood demands teaching the accepted skills of numeracy, literacy, communication and modern technology. It means helping young people to equip themselves for rich and positive lives in today's society, this demands a basic and real acceptance of the value of each human person in the knowledge that she is unique.

Working with the home, the school community is the milieu in which the young are initiated into the inheritance and culture of the society in which they find themselves, and in the case of Notre Dame, the rich inheritance of Christian belief and culture. It is a group which lives, works, studies and prays together.

Schooling and education are often accepted as synonymous, yet this is not so. Schooling is often systematic, regimented, standardised: it can be the tool of politicians, philosophers, theologians, sociologists, industrialists, or economists. It can be based on methods which have clearly defined objectives as their aim. It can take place in an academic factory in which measurable and clearly defined success is the sole purpose of its being. Examination results are still the measure of good schooling, in spite of all the lip-service paid to personal development, education for leisure and character training.

We must admit that schooling and politics have always been closely aligned. The altruism of 'education for all' was forced on Britain in the late 19th century by the rise of industrialism and the need for men who could succeed in business, and thus contribute to the status and power of the British Empire. The structures of society, the types of schooling offered at each level and the freedom to participate in the process were controlled by status and finance. Political ideology still directs the schooling of children, and recently, economic pressures have been more overt.

It is difficult to educate in today's schools. The imparting of knowledge, the induction into social mores, the acquisition of marketable skills are so time-consuming that fewer and fewer resources are available for real education. The demand by society for more and more knowledge, higher and higher examination grades (often called 'standards'), and specialised technical knowledge, narrows the field of pupil experience, individual research, personal interaction and creativity.

The work ethic whereby a person achieves his value by his job, his pay packet (or salary), his place in the hierarchical management structure and his power of production, militates against the Christian respect for person as person because he is intrinsically of value.

Education should consist partly of the objectives of schooling listed, but is so very much more. Each person has unique gifts and talents waiting to be stimulated and developed by environment and society. Education should provide these opportunities, these experiences, these contacts. It should awaken in each person an awareness of her own latent powers of every type, and help develop the confidence and self-image which is necessary if these gifts are to flourish. Education should develop real individuality and self-respect. A sense of wonder and gratitude to God for these gifts, together with a sense of responsibility for their use, places which education within Julie's basic appreciation that 'God is good'.

In an age where might is right, where the majority decide and rule, where bureaucracy dominates the individual, such education is suspect and even judged anarchic. Those who have shown themselves prepared to stand as individuals are admired and feared. Ghandi, Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King and Solzhenitsyn are such figures of contradiction.

If Christian education develops the individual, it must also consider the society in which it operates. Mutual help, sharing and upbuilding are of the essence. However, this does not mean a cosy closed society which withdraws from planetary problems. Pious platitudes are of little use in a world faced with pollution, starvation, oppression and the prospect of holocaust. Education must sensitise individuals to these evils, and students must learn to use their talents and powers to face them. Whether it be through political, economic, legal or financial action, involvement is necessary. The goodness of God can be communicated not only by caring, nursing, cultivating and distributing, but by those who set up businesses, learn management, research and trade. It is not so much what is done but how it is done. When such activities are based on true respect for persons and are directed to providing the means for others to fulfil their humanity, we see true education.

Education is a lifelong development, schooling is not. Process is the essence of education, not aims and objectives, as in schooling. It is not quantifiable or measureable whereas schooling is becoming more and more so.

Education and schooling should be complementary and mutually supportive. I suggest that they are becoming less and less so.

In a society where power and success are respected and failure unacceptable, the message of Christ which is one of fulfilment through 'failure' seems ill at ease. But what else is Christian education but this?