

The Role of Convent Schools in the Religious Formation of the Youth

Edith Stein

[Translator's note: Translation of "Die Mitwirkung der klösterlichen Bildungsanstalten an der religiösen Bildung der Jugend," Ganzheitliches Leben: Schriften zur religiösen Bildung, Edith Steins Werke, Vol. 12 (Freiburg: Herder, 1990), 95-108. Bracketed numbers in the text refer to the German page numbers. This is a translation of a lecture given in 1929. In this lecture Edith Stein addresses the role that convent schools play in the religious formation of the youth. The schools she has in mind are boarding schools staffed by Sisters. Although such schools are no longer common, Edith Stein's considerations are nonetheless pertinent and applicable to any school, and especially to any religious Sister who teaches.]

I had been asked to speak about the contribution to the religious formation for the youth, but I found this theme in need of completion. One may ask: with whom do they contribute to this formation and whom do they form?

With whom? In virtue of her teaching office, the Church is in the first place called to the religious formation of the youth. She fulfills this task through religious services, through the administration of the Sacraments, through preaching of her priests, and in religious instruction — through her whole activity for the good of souls.

The temporally first formation is usually assigned to the parents, and we all know that generally the most enduring impressions are made here. As a third factor, after the Church and the parents, comes the institution where the growing young people spend a large portion of their decisive years of development. Even though a neglect of the first and second factors leaves little hope for the success of the third, a large part of the responsibility falls, nonetheless, upon the third factor.

Even when the child lives with his parents and does not board at school, he can receive influential direction for his entire life from school. The effectiveness, and therefore, the responsibility, is even greater when the entire formation is placed in the hands of one institution. Here the opportunities differ according to the type of institution: whether it be ecumenical or confessional, whether it be conducted by lay or religious persons. I consider it my task today to speak of the particular opportunities of contributing to the religious formation of the youth that are open to convent schools.

1. Religious formation

An indispensable preparatory question is to ask what we mean by *religious formation*. Formation is the shaping of materials. [96] In ordinary language we mean by *formation* the process of this shaping, as well as the result, the shape that is stamped upon the material that has received it.

Four elements belong to the task of formation:

- the shape that *should* be reached; that is, the *goal of formation*;
- the *material* that is to be shaped; that is, the human children entrusted to us;
- the hands that are at work and the *instruments* that they use;
- the events that shape and form.

1.1 The goal of formation

We consider next the *goal of formation*. Which shape ought we give the material? We should help to form the children of men into *children of God*. They ought to be *formed into God, formed into Christ*. This means that they should travel their life's path at the hand of God, and they should be led by God's will without resistance. It belongs to this, that their path becomes the path of the followers of Christ. They should deny themselves and put on Christ, they should be living Members of the Body of Christ through whom the supernatural life of the Mystical Body flows.

Alter Christus — another Christ — this is the shape, this is the goal of formation that ought to be attained. What an extraordinarily large task! But we may not settle for anything less. When one speaks of the call to perfection within the Church this does not mean that only religious are called to perfection. The distinctive feature of religious is that they have become conscious of their vocation and that they have obliged themselves, indeed in specific forms and with particular means, to the duties of the religious state. But every Christian is called to perfection.¹

1.2 The material

What is the *material* that should assume this shape like? Does it already have an aptitude for this? Does it perhaps already carry a seed — as an *inner form* [97] — within itself, just as a grain of seed carries the shape of a rose Sash or an apple tree? Or must this shape be applied externally as the sculptor applies form to the clay? Human children need to be formed into children of God. The task that we must perform is both that of the gardener and that of the sculptor. Indeed, there is an inner being from within to without. It must do so in a double sense. There is in every creature of God a *natural striving towards God*, the creature's source and goal. This striving moves in *every* human heart as the longing

¹ Translator's note: This was written in 1929, over thirty years before the Second Vatican Council emphasized the universal call to holiness in the fifth chapter of *Lumen Gentium*.

for happiness, as the desire for purity and goodness, even when there is no knowledge of God. Over and above this, the grace of *Baptism* inserts into the soul of every child of Christ a seed that can unfold into the supernatural life that is crowned by life in heaven.

Both the natural striving towards good and the supernatural equipment for eternal life are grains of seed that segue care and that, without care, can waste away. Both seeds are imbedded in a material that gives more or less resistance to the shaping; therefore, these seeds must, in order to grow and to make the material pliable, be made and maintained as strong driving motives. The seeds must be nourished and they must be confronted with a pattern of an external form. The natural striving towards the good grows and becomes strong when, for example, naturally good conduct is appropriately affirmed. The joy found herein is nutrition for the soul. Specific goals and tasks and moral examples work formatively as external forms that provide direction for those who still have indeterminate motives. The life of grace grows and germinates when an image of God in His majesty, and His worthiness of our love are placed before the growing spirits. This inflames love and devotion in the soul. It is also formed externally through established prayers and devotions that satisfy a yet indeterminate desire for expression.

This is the *positive* external task and formation, that are required for the unfolding of the inner formation. In *sain*, as *negative* complement, there must be opposition to negative influences, the wild offshoots and the harmful, that appear as the slowness and refractoriness of the material.

With the description of the material, the formational process has already been sketched as a growing and formational process from within to without that requires only certain external aids. [98]

1.3 Method of formation

We have already spoken briefly of him who is called to render this service. The method comes into play in the task of formation has only been hastily drawn in our examples: We must now consider these methods more carefully in order to discern which of them are at the disposal of convent schools.

The human child must become a child of God, the human soul must take on the figure of Christ. Therefore, the external form must be *Christ Himself*, and He must be brought to the material. The inner form, the example which the human soul can imitate, is the *image* of Christ as the *Son of Man*, Who has walked upon this earth and Who is given to us in the Gospels.

The *living Christ* is, after all, an objective reality among us: the *Eucharistic Christ*, who is the Sacrament of love enters our soul itself and shapes it again and again from within. In closest connection herewith is the *Mystical Body of Christ*, the Church with its history and its *liturgical life*, her prayers and *sacrifice*, all of which make her children members. Upon her living members she imprints the image of Christ.

2. The role of convent schools in the task of formation

What ought the convent school do in order to mediate the calling of the children's souls to be formed into the image of Christ?

2.1 Formation through the image of the Son of Man

To present the image of the Son of Man as portrayed in the Gospel is, of course, first of all proper to religious instruction, and this can happen in every school. But the formative power of this image depends upon *how* this happens. It makes a difference whether someone simply reports the facts of the Holy Scriptures such just as he would teach any other subject that he has made himself familiar with, or whether someone who has been formed into His image through long, confident communication, and is to a certain extent penetrated by Him, speaks of the Savior. For him who again and again [99] contemplates the Gospel, who, with loving soul, immerses himself in the deeds and words of Christ, the words of Christ become part of him and they become a living force that is continually effective in him. What he thus bears in himself comes involuntarily to expression in his words at a given occasion.

The teacher who lives with the Savior in this way does not only speak of Him in religious instruction. Where it is a matter of practical division, he will sense in each situation what is appropriate, and this will be a guiding principle for the distinction. In the difficult and thoughtful questions that sometimes arise in literature discussions, an enlightening teaching of the Savior may sometimes come to mind wholly unlooked for. When a word from the Scriptures enlightens something that was previously dark, then the children learn right away what a living power the Word of God has. God's Word does not appear as a "pious saying," when it enters into the midst of a living thought-process as enlightening and fruitful. When the teacher, as a docile student, constantly attends the school of the Holy Scriptures, and allows the Savior to take him into *His* school, the children will notice that He is present, that He helps with the work; and in this way He grasps possession of their souls.

In this way a good part of the religious formation is done without having explicitly planned or worked toward this goal. The soul who is formed by God's Word involuntarily helps to shape others in this way. And where can be a better foundation for such a formative effect than a religious community, whose members oblige themselves to practice daily meditation? They need only to make these daily exercises fruitful and allow them to freely operate in their educational tasks — of course in the proper time and place — then receptive children's souls will not remain unaffected. One thing must be maintained: never may anything religious be brought in an artificial and external manner and in a context where it has no place; otherwise, the children will feel that there is an "ulterior motive" and the effect, as a rule, is repellent instead of formative for religious formation. [100]

2.2 Eucharistic formation

The best way to arrive at a living image of the Savior — one that forms Him in the soul of the teacher as well as in the student is to turn from the consideration of the historical Christ to communication with

the present One: *communication with the Eucharistic Savior*. He who has tried it knows that contemplation is nowhere more fruitful than before the tabernacle. It is indeed well-known that the same things can have a wholly different effect at different times and different circumstances. One may have read a word in Scripture a hundred times, one may have heard and spoken it, and one may have understood in it a certain sense, but it may have never made an inner impression — it remained on the surface like the grain of seed on the rocky ground and it cannot germinate. But at once it suddenly penetrates and it becomes as a flash of shining light that enlightens the mystery of the Faith and that lights up ones own dark journey of life. This happens most frequently in the presence of the Eucharistic Savior. He who seeks Him and opens himself to Him, he who, as it were, places himself as formative material into His hands, is shaped by Him. He opens the eyes of the soul, so that what is written becomes light, He opens the ears so that they hear it, and He opens the lips to proclaim it when and where and how this can fruitfully happen.

This is only one of the effects that comes from the Eucharistic Savior. He lays His hand upon us when we come to Him, most powerfully of course, when we take part in the Holy Sacrifice in the way that the meaning of this Sacrifice demands; that is, when we are not only present and see and hear, but when we offer with Him, when we give ourselves wholly in order to be changed and made into the sacrifice. The Savior can most fittingly dwell in those who approach the altar in this way; He can make them into a member of His Body, as a branch on the divine vine. One need hardly add that Communion belongs to such participation in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as consummation of the union. A more powerful forming effect cannot be found. The Savior Himself is here the sculptor, and the task of the teacher is only to lead the children to this Sculptor.²

Here the convent school has an immeasurable advantage over others simply because they have the Savior in their house. Every one who comes into the vicinity of the convent [101] (even within knowing anything about the Source) can sense something of the silent effect that comes from the Lord of the house. It is evident that children are receptive to this effect to anyone who has the opportunity to observe how many of them, in the span of a few days, slip into the church for a few minutes of silent dialog. Certainly most people need to be helped somewhat before they realize what a treasure they have in their Eucharistic Savior. This happens primarily when they are led in a lively and penetrating way to the feeling that Christ is really and truly present in the most Blessed Sacrament, that He is only waiting for us to come to Him so that He may shower us with His love, that Christ offers Himself really and truly in the holy Sacrifice; and that Christ unites Himself with us in our inner soul in Holy Communion.

He who has a lively faith in these truths must with all his strength be attracted to visits to the Blessed Sacrament, to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, to Communion. To disclose these truths to the children is a matter of dogmatic formation, but the opportunity is not restricted to this formation. One also encounters such questions when teaching other subjects — in history, in literature — or in conversation with the children outside of the classroom, and then it is important that one can give answers modestly in the appropriate way. One can discover lack of clarity, doubts or difficulties of which the religion

2 Translator's note: Note again that this is written in 1929, many years preceding the Second Vatican Council.

teacher may have absolutely no suspicion, and which the children for one or other reason cannot voice to him. The correct word here can be a defense against serious error.

To find the right word, one's own strong faith alone is not always capable, and an unsatisfactory answer can cause more damage than help. For this reason, thorough dogmatic knowledge is essential; that is, one must have the truths of the Faith not only ready in memory, but one must grasp them in their organic connection and in their inner meaning, and again they must be the inner form of one's spirit; that is, these truths must be so much a part of oneself that one can at any time engage in the requests of the moment. One can only gain such a dogmatic knowledge, of course, through continual occupation with teachings of the Faith: through the definitions of the dogmas themselves, through the works of the Fathers of the Church and other learned teachers, with classical and modern theological works.

[102] How can one find the time for this? This question must press upon many, and I know that it is not easy. But one's entire life is at one's disposal. It cannot and need not all happen at once, not even much at once. The main thing is continuity. The inner-soul grows slowly and imperceptibly, but steadily and surely, when one only allows for the daily bread. Where there is not any other time at one's disposal, it is perhaps possible — in the same way as with the Holy Scriptures — to use the prescribed daily exercises [i.e. meditation] for this purpose: instead of the customary meditation and devotional books, to use the works mentioned above. (Of course one's occupation with these works need not be purely intellection, it must retain the proper use, that is, such a use that makes it conducive to good reading or meditation. But this is already the proper stance that enables us to interiorize the truth of the Faith and to make them organically one's own).

In addition to this thorough familiarity with the theology of the Eucharist, which allows us to provide at any given moment a reason and answer, something else still needs to be added in order to truly lead the children to the Eucharistic Savior: one's own Eucharistic life. Daily Holy Mass and Communion are self-understood for women religious, and they are on the average customary for most pupils of convent schools. But the children must sense that it is not only a matter of imposed rules, but an inner drawing of the heart. One consequence of belief in the Eucharistic truths must be that the Eucharist is truly the center of the common life and that in comparison all earthly affairs shrink as meaningless.

I will offer a small practical example. When I was a teacher, I never arranged an excursion in such a way that it would exclude Mass and Communion. The joy and relaxation of the children need not be diminished thereby. If there is only one day at one's disposal, then one does not permit oneself to think of a distant excursion, but one chooses something nice nearby. If one meets with a spirited desire for a more distant trip, then I think it is appropriate to extend it over two or more days rather than giving up the Highest for it. Of course this is not an immovable rule, but because one takes it as self-understood, the children also sense that one's [103] strength, peace, and joy come from the Eucharistic Savior and that without His blessing one can undertake nothing.

When one has succeeded in bringing the young souls in the school to the Savior through instruction and example, then one's task as educator is finished and one can disappear as the middleman. I think that if these positive ways were-fully used one could do without what has always seemed to me a very

doubtful method: the control and supervision of attendance at Church and reception of the Sacraments. I am aware of the justifications that are brought forth for this customary practice and that one cannot without hesitation and without further ado remove them: But I can understand it when the children experience this supervision as something like a policeforce, that the Holiest and Sweetest has the opposite effect of being painful and provocative, and that the supervisors are degraded in the student's eyes. I am convinced that even in delicate and sensitive souls many seeds of the inner life are killed through such regulation, and I do not know if it produces a corresponding good.

2.3 Formed through the Mystical Body of Christ

The Eucharist is the-soul, the inner life principle of the Church. The people whom Christ, through the Eucharist, makes His own are the members of His Mystical Body. This Body itself, the Church, can likewise be a principle source of formation in the religious formation. There are three points to consider: the external history of the organized Christian community; dogma, in which the teaching of Christ unfolds and advances; lastly the prayer of the Church.

2.3.1 Church History

It is easy to see how Church history can have a formative effect. What a lively inspiration can the image of the saints, who went before us on the road towards following Christ, especially the heroic faith and sacrificial courage of the early Christian community and the great trials of the Church of the 15th, 16th, and 17 hundreds, provide for the young, receptive characters!

[104] It is essential that everything is brought in a lively way before their eyes, and towards this end it is necessary that we ourselves live with and after the development of the Church. Those in religious life are led into this living with the liturgical year through the Breviary. Our presentations can be easily enriched from a host of good sources. There are works that incorporate primary sources from the great talents and personalities of Church history.

We can present these to the children, and when we think it appropriate that we can even give such reading material to the children directly.

2.3.2 Dogma

Like the mustard seed, the small band of followers has grown into the tree that overshadows the world, the tree of the Church. In the same way, the few teachings of Christ have grown into the far reaching organism of the Church's teachings. In the example of the Eucharistic truths it was already shown that a thorough dogmatic formation is needed.

Today we must always realize that our children can easily come into contact with conceptions that can bring them into doubt and difficulties, that can evoke confusion and error. Even when they come from a good Catholic family and are raised in a convent school, they are not safe from this: extern students,

people with whom they come into contact during vacation, magazines and books, even the textbooks that they use in school, bring them into contact with the atmosphere of the times. And if they remain untouched by such influences during their time in the convent school, they will encounter them as soon as they have left the tower of the convent. And it is good if we send them out, not unprepared, but wholly prepared for this spiritual battle. Therefore this means, first of all, that we must be well-equipped. We must for ourselves critically think through and fully cover the material that the syllabus demand we cover with the children, so that we are then able to discuss factually, irreproachably, and convincingly the questions that come to us unexpectedly. In this way the children will gradually develop the spiritual organs whereby they themselves, when they are fully developed, can meet what comes to them when they are put on their own resources. [105]

2.3.3. *Liturgy*

The Church battles and teaches and forms her newly grown members into fighters and learners when they look upon the images of the past and hear the teachings of the Church. And she has yet another powerful way to form souls: that is her *prayer*. In the same way as the external structures and the dogmas of the Church have richly and gloriously unfolded, so has the prayer of the Church unfolded in her *liturgy*. Indeed, in the liturgy everything can have a formative to the goal of religious formation is summarized.

We have already spoken about the meaning of the Holy Sacrifice and the appropriate participation in this Sacrifice. There is no better introduction to this correct participation as the words of the liturgy of the Mass, in which the sacred acts have found their full oral expression. In him who prays these words with open spirit and heart, its meaning must become alive and it must drive him to participation. Word and meaning belong together as body and soul; they are together one living unity. For this reason the words cannot be replaced by others chosen at pleasure. There is a difference between being in the Church and praying freely (which of course has its value and place and that cannot be taken away from any soul who longs for it) and following the Sacrificial deed with the prayers and songs of a German sung Mass or in closely following the spoken words of the Eucharistic prayer itself (of course the Latin because even the translation is still ‘replacement’ even when the translation is as close as possible to the original).³

Thus one may dare to say: even though far an individual soul according to its individual disposition or temporary condition another type of prayer may seem to be more fruitful, objectively it is the most perfect Sacrificial celebration when the believers pray the liturgical prayers with the priest. So that this can become fully fruitful interiorly, a knowledge of Latin is of course essential; and I consider it a liturgical ideal that all the faithful know enough Latin that they can understand the Liturgy. The ideal image of a liturgical Sacrifice requires completion in still another direction. The word is indeed according to its full nature not written, also not thought quietly, but it is a sounding word. And again

3 Translator’s note: Mass was not *said* in the vernacular at this time; Edith Stein refers to the preference of reading the Latin text with the priest rather than reading the German translation which was customarily printed next to the Latin in the missal.

there are sounds and melodies that according to its meaning belong to the words. The liturgical word also has a corresponding sound; these are the sounds of [106] *Gregorian chants*. Everything else that is sung and played in the church can be the expression of personal taste and the most powerful religious sentiments, it may “Speak to the souls of the singers and listeners, but it does not belong to the liturgical music; that is, it does not belong objectively to the holy Sacrifice.

And so I would like to say: the ideal form of the celebration of the Mass, which at the same time is the one that has the most powerful effect in shaping the participants into members of the Church, is the Mass where the faithful pray with the priest, and, when possible, where they sing with the priest. The prayers that have profession (Gloria, Creed, Preface) form the people dogmatically; the Epistles, Gospels and the proper prayers form the people historically.

The Liturgy of the Hours has an inner connection to the liturgy of the Mass. What is suggested in the Mass, but what is condensed in virtue of the concentration upon the Sacrifice, is here unfolded. The historical Biblical stories and meditations on them, the dogmatic considerations in the lessons, the conversation with God, songs of praise and thanksgiving in the Psalms and hymns. On the other hand, the solemn praise of God longs “quia major omni laude nec laudare sufficis,”⁴ for the translation from word to deed, to the Sacrifice which only is equal to God’s majesty.

The importance that the solemn choral prayer has for the formation of souls, not only for priests and religious but for all, is evident to anyone who is familiar with the life of our Benedictine abbeys. On every day of the year one can see people quietly praying in the nave when the monks take their places in choir. On the high feasts great crowds come in from near and far so that there is barely enough room. What does this show us? Is it not the instinctive sense that one is here near heaven, that the praise of God of these consecrated persons represents the place where the Church militant meets the Church triumphant, and that one can receive from these consecrated places strength for the daily battles of our earthly pilgrimage?

I believe that there is no more comprehensive and more effective method for religious formation than the liturgy in its double form: the liturgy of the Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours. Convents to whom the formation of the youth is entrusted usually have both in their own house. But do they make adequate use of them? Two [107] things are necessary for this: first the appropriate cultivation of the liturgy within the life of the convent, and then, the children’s participation therein.

Much has already happened in this direction as far as the holy Mass is concerned: liturgical instruction for the children, formation in choral song, the use of choral Masses at least in some Sundays and feastdays. It is otherwise with the Liturgy of the Hours. It seems to me that we have not yet adequately grasped its meaning for religious formation. Many find it often difficult or altogether impossible to unite choral prayer with teaching, because they do not realize how much strength one can receive from this prayer for the daily work in the school. They do not realize that one is again and again raised up in the

4 Editor’s note: “For He is greater than all praise; you do not praise enough.” From St. Thomas Aquinas’ sequence, *Lauda Sion Salvatore*, used for the Feast of Corpus Christi. This verse is speaking to the Church, in the image of the Heavenly Sion.

Liturgy of the Hours from the small affairs of daily life, and is filled with the life of the Church, then one can bring this to the children.

This effect becomes ever stronger, the more perfectly the Liturgy of the Hours is fashioned in a liturgical sense. And I also think it possible to make this directly accessible to the children. Of course they cannot come into the choir. Even in Beuron⁵ no stranger is allowed a place in choir. But everyone can see and hear what happens in choir and the doors are often wide open: he who wants to pray with them is heartily welcome.

It seems to me that in many convents everything takes place too much behind closed doors. Often this is connected with the construction of the convent church which does not permit one to see the choir. This cannot be easily changed. But there is also a definite inner mentality at work that considers the inner life of the convent as an opportunity for enclosure, in which one wants none to peek. In the interest of religious formation I deplore this. When the children are led in the spirit of the Liturgy of the Hours, they may, after having left the convent school, long for it. If they are able to come in to at least hear these prayers, this can awaken a holy joy and recollection from which the children can benefit all their lives.

What is here said in the context of the Liturgy of the Hours applies to the entire convent life. Convent life should not be something secretive that raises curiosity. That is not consonant with its value and holiness. Children who row up in the convent should know what genuine convent life is. I almost believe that the complaints about lack of vocations would cease if there were more openness [108] because the attractive power of such a genuinely lived convent life is so strong. And the youngsters who are not called to enter the convent, will, after such a formation at the convent, leave as true apostles because a genuine religious formation places the spirit of the apostles in them. He who is formed after the image of Christ, in him the love of Christ, and the love of souls must also be alive. There is foundationally no difference between personal sanctification and the apostolate. He who strives after perfection does God's will and he desires this: not only for himself, but for all.

And so I come to the conclusion: religious formation is being formed by Christ into Christ. The Gospels show us how Christ has lived. Christ who continues to live among us in the Eucharist and in the struggles, the teachings and the prayers of the Church. He Himself forms souls. No one is as much called to restore the bond between Him and the children of men as those religious communities who have consecrated their entire lives to Him. Mediating religious formation is the specific call of convent schools; when they do not do so, they have no reason for existence. They can accomplish this only as far as they live their religious vocations and as far as they allow their apostolic work arise from there.

5 Editor's note: Beuron Archabbey was the center of the Liturgical Movement of the late 1800s, and its influence continued to be felt even when other monasteries (such as Maria Laach or Solesmes) became more prominent liturgical centers in the early 1900s.