

Are Newmann Clubs Enough?

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Interview with a Jesuit regarding catechesis for Catholic students in public high schools. Quotes a Newman Club worker who complains that the students won't come unless there is a dance. (DDLW #270).

"I first became interested in Newman Clubs," said Father John Corbett, S.J., in a recent interview, "when I was stationed at Fordham, across the street from Theodore Roosevelt High School, and discovered the shocking number of Catholic children there who were receiving no sort of religious instruction.

"There was a Newman Club, of course, but when I inquired into its work, I found that it was purely social. 'You can't get the kids here if you're going to preach to them,' the teacher in charge of it told me. 'You have to give dances for them.'

"So you have a situation where either the Newman Clubs are distinctly religious in character – and then only those children come who would not neglect their religious training anyway; or else you have Newman Clubs which are organizations for giving dances and having a Communion Breakfast once a year."

Father Corbett spoke of one zealous Catholic teacher in George Washington High School who knows every Catholic in her school personally and sees that they get to Confession at least once a month, who gives her time to interesting their parents and pastors in their duty of providing real religious training for them, and who arranges lectures for her Newman Club by priests at least once a month on subjects connected with liturgy or dogma. Another teacher in Bryant High School brings her club once a month to the Cenacle convent, where they have a religious instruction, go to Confession, and finish with Benediction a day spent in truly religious surroundings.

"There are other teachers in other schools, too," he said, "Who give generously of their time and energy in their efforts to counteract the purely secular training of the public schools. But that is not the true answer to the problem. The answer lies with the pastors of parishes. It is they who have the facilities for providing religious instruction. And it is they, not the teachers in the public schools, who have the responsibility before God.

"There should be one priest appointed for the diocese whose sole work would be the religious education of public school children. It would be up to him to delegate a priest in each parish to register the children there attending public schools. He would aid in the organization of weekly classes for them, receive reports from the parishes on the work being done, and guard the religious welfare of the children in the public schools themselves by his authority and knowledge of the situation."

It is not an answer to say, as many priests do, continued Father Corbett, that all Catholic children should be in Catholic schools. Obviously, the Catholic schools

could not begin to accommodate them all. But we have weekly instruction classes for children in the public elementary schools, and there is no reason, he contends, why the work of the parishes should stop there; religious instruction should be related with the other subjects taught the children, to offset the evil effects of non-religious or anti-religious teaching given them, especially in such subjects as biology, history, and economics.

“I would insist,” he said, “that each child in the upper classes of the public high schools get a copy of the four great Papal Encyclicals – the one on marriage, that on education, and the two on labor and social justice, each of which may be obtained for ten cents from the Paulist Press – and be instructed in the meaning and implications of them. And Catholic children should be supplied with examination outlines, especially in history, which show the Church in its true light in relation to civilization, in place of the decidedly Protestant outlines now used by most of the children with the tacit consent of their teachers.”

I asked Father Corbett if any parishes provided such religious training for public high school children.

“Well,” he replied, “when Bishop Kearney was pastor up at St. Francis Xavier’s Church here in the Bronx he was an active and effective worker in this cause. And Father Strugnell at St. Thomas Aquinas’ Church has a list of all the children in his parish attending public schools and sees that they receive regular instruction. There is a Father Edward J. Donovan, too, of St. Aloysius Church, out in Great Neck, Long Island, who has worked out these suggestions with great success. As for the others – I don’t want to make any sweeping statements, but there was a letter in the Brooklyn *Tablet* not so long ago asking about parish study clubs or instruction classes for public school children. And there wasn’t a single answer.”