

THE RELIGIOUS TRAINING OF CHILDREN AT HOME.¹

By X. Y. Z.

THE religious education of children is certainly part of the main work in life of a mother of five children, and therefore I say what I can.

I take it that our subject to-day is not the enormous one of the moral training of children. The subject is great enough indeed, for it is the religious education of children; but we are not going to discuss how to deal with untruthfulness, or how to help a child to be unselfish. We have met rather to consider how to make the weapons with which a Christian soldier should fight, and not how to teach him how to use them.

This religious education of our children is carried on by Bible teaching, by the help we give them in their devotions, and by the Sunday training.

There is a great deal to be said about Sunday; it comprehends, of course, one-seventh of our children's lives, and I will take that first.

We call it the Lord's Day, and so it should indeed be to our children. It is such a help to parents, especially where the fatal habit of reserve on religious subjects has crept into the family, so that the Saviour's name falls strangely on the ear if spoken in weekday talks. But on Sunday the shy child and the silent parent find the way prepared for them, and the ice is broken, and there are plentiful opportunities for the words that will not come readily at other times. In some families there is not this trouble; but all alike should be very careful to keep the children's Sunday

[p 483]

such a day that at no time should the holiest words seem unsuitable. I would say, therefore, that—

- 1st. Sunday must be our Lord's day.
- 2nd. Sunday must be different from other days.
- 3rd. But Sunday must not be a dull day.

Sunday must be different from other days.—It is of no use to attempt to make Sunday a kind of rival to the Saturday half-holiday. I think all will grant that. Saturday and Sunday appeal to entirely different sides of child nature, and we must not be surprised to find Saturday enjoyed with more keenness and excitement than Sunday. Fortunately there is happiness to be found in peace and deep interests as well as in excitement, romping, and fun; and it is the former happiness that we must try to make our children enjoy on Sunday. It must be our place to show them that religion is a blessing and not merely a duty; we must aim at leading the children to the highest things, and we must not deceive ourselves in any way; we must not be content that they should perform certain Sunday tasks and duties, and then relax into play as a sort of reward.

For instance, I heard of a very good mother saying: "I am keeping chess for a Sunday game." Now chess is a very harmless game; but I think it very exciting for children, and I should fear that a child might wake on Sunday morning and think—"Oh, it's Sunday! I wish the church service was over, and that it was time for me to play at chess." If this happens, the very essence

of Sunday seems to me to be lost. As I said, chess is a very harmless game; but it has nothing to do with our Lord and His day. I should infinitely prefer that children should be occupied, or occupy themselves, with a microscope, when a few words would lead their thoughts to the Maker of the wonderful things they are looking at; or that they should be making scrapbooks for poor children or hospitals. We certainly have those customs which I rather dislike to hear called Sunday “games.” One describes a scene in the Bible, and the others guess it. We keep to the Old Testament, and it does not seem to me to lead to any sort of irreverence.

But as for ordinary games, the only times when I think them allowable are in times of illness, and also when, through bad weather, the whole of Sunday has to be spent indoors. Then, indeed, towards evening, the mother may be at an end of her resources, and there does come a weary time, and unless some letter game, or pencil game, or poetry game is allowed, it is very

[p 484]

hard to avoid my third proposition—*i.e.*, *Sunday must not be a dull day.*

And how can we avoid this, seeing the restless, active little beings that we have to deal with?

Well, to begin with, it is necessary for the parents to take care that they have time to devote to their own children on Sunday. Not even in doing good works can parents spend the whole day away from home, far less in visiting or entertaining friends. You will understand that I am not speaking of a father who is a clergyman. He, perhaps, can find more leisure to attend to his children on week-days than on Sunday. But as regards fathers in general they cannot stand aloof and leave all the great religious privileges of Sunday to the mother. Reserve on religious subjects is perhaps more likely to exist between fathers and children than between mothers and children; so they must not throw away their Sunday opportunities.

On looking back to my childhood’s Sundays I find that one of the distinct pleasures they brought was that we saw so much of my father. He was a very busy man in those days, and Sunday was his only free day. But he constantly took us for a walk: it was a London walk, but we did not care where we went to; to be with him and to hear his recollections was our great pleasure.

He used to read us the Bible also. I believe *Bel and the Dragon* was our favourite story; but the chief thing was that we were accustomed [sic] to see him with the Bible in his hand; and fathers may be sure that this impression will not die out of their children’s minds.

The other things that I enjoyed on Sunday when I was a child were hymn singing, time for reading, and rest from lessons.

Sunday is a day of rest, and there are many lessons in these days for our children. Let us try to keep their day of rest for them. I would have Sunday tasks as small as might well be. No child of mine, unless of its own free will, should learn a whole hymn on Sunday. It is a very common and delightful custom to repeat hymns on Sunday—every one of the family saying something—and you will say, “Hymns ought to be learnt.” Yes indeed they ought; but must it be a whole hymn? Would not two verses carefully said, be as acceptable, and the rest of the hymn could be read, and more of it learnt another Sunday.

Again, is it necessary for children to repeat the whole of the

[p 485]

Church Catechism every Sunday? I speak feelingly, for I did it as a child, and so I suppose did

many others; but I am sure it would have been no less perfectly known if one-third or one-fourth had been said at one time. Indeed, I should advise still less; for catechisms are only frameworks, and their meaning must be illustrated. I have heard of children learning the whole Gospel every Sunday; and I must say some of these tasks seem to me rather like devices to keep the children out of mischief and give them something to do: but they rather do fatal mischief if they make children dislike the day which should be the crown of the week.

Let us consider, finally, then, what we can do to make Sunday a happy and interesting day. I am afraid I must here draw on my own experience; but I shall hope that other parents will make helpful suggestions. I will go through our Sunday.

The children may get up later, having no lessons before breakfast; but I invariably hear one or other of them playing and singing hymns soon after eight. After breakfast the little ones see Bible pictures and sing a hymn. Then those who go to church bring their Prayer-books, and we look out the Psalms and Lessons, Collect, Epistle, and Gospel. I have the Teacher's Prayer-book and the Commentary to explain any hard verses or to give any interesting details. After church they are out of doors. On wet Sundays, if I leave them at home I should expect the bigger children to read part of the Service, and after that they might write letters or read.

After early dinner they go to my Sunday School class. They like being taught with the other children, and find their presence very helpful. Sunday school is over by three, and then comes an hour when, if I could carry out my ideal, they should go and visit some old or bedridden person; but for some years we literally have had no one near us to whom they could pay such visits. On fine Sundays they would linger out of doors; but you know we have a great many wet Sundays, and those are the difficult days; so we will suppose that they are driven indoors at three. The nursery children must come down again, and bricks are allowed to amuse them with; but our little girl of five is sure to prefer to think of things in the Bible, as mentioned before. There is a bit of Catechism learnt in the morning to repeat after that; and then I always try to read aloud. Of course I like the book to be a true one; and one of the most important things we can read is any

[p 486]

account of missionary work. We have a reading from the monthly missionary papers on the first Sunday of every month, instead of a Sunday-school lesson, so my children hear then what is going on; but there are histories of early mission work, and lives of saints and martyrs, and good men, which I am only too glad to read, *if I can see that it is not like a lesson to the children*; but my chief wish is that they should look forward to the reading; so I read them anything that has a Sunday spirit in it—for instance, such story-books as "Laneton Parsonage." While I am reading I like them to draw texts, or paint them, or to practise drawing different alphabets, in order to draw texts by-and-by. Some can paint flowers on their texts; and I allow any drawing that is carefully done, and not comic. Christmas and Easter card drawing may occupy many Sunday hours before those festivals. Tea-time is often a social family time, when other members of the family come in; and surely Sunday is a day for family intercourse, either at such a time or during the morning walk. Children are always pleased to hear about the older generation and the family past. Any memoir, too, of those who are loved and lost may be read to them, and old letters of any interest. But to return to Sunday tea. Before evening church comes the hymn saying or reading. It is optional which is done, but we generally choose a subject; on Quinquagesima Sunday it may probably be the Influence of the Holy Spirit. The First

Sunday in Lent, Resisting the Devil. This interests the children, and makes them search their hymn-books. Suppose, again, it is too wet to go to evening church. If the children have been left alone during morning service, I think one of the parents should stay at home with them now.

It is a time for hymn singing, and indeed for any good music. It seems to me that all music, except dance, opera, and comic music, is a boon on Sundays, and elevates the children's minds.

It is the same with poetry. Suppose the father be left at home. After a Bible story perhaps he may read poetry aloud, or let the children choose poems to read to him, or hear them say the poetry they have learnt at their lessons; and furthermore, as regards poetry, I shall be glad, when my children begin to have extract books, to see them copying poetry into them on Sunday.

I will now take the subject of Bible teaching. I think I need hardly speak of the Bible stories told to the nursery children.

[p 487]

They are so eager, and the pictures are so helpful, and the stories are so beautiful that I think no parent could be at a loss. I like my children to be accustomed to the actual words of the Bible as soon as possible, partly in order that they should know just what is in the Bible, for it is difficult to tell a child a story and not to add some probable details—in fact, it is right to do so; but I like them soon to understand what is in the Book, and what I supply from knowledge of Eastern ways, &c. I also think that being familiar with the words Thy and Thine, from the Bible reading, helps them in their prayers. Soon you have to see that, even in teaching the little children, you are following some method. For want of method some serious omission may be made in teaching children; so we must be careful that our teaching is systematic, and that the children get a consecutive idea of Old Testament History, and a simple knowledge of the great doctrines of the Christian Faith.

It is an important thing to read with a commentary, and any other helpful book that you can get. Use such lessons as will help you to bring out the practical side of the Old Testament readings. By all means encourage the children to talk, though always insisting on reverence. It does not matter if only half a dozen verses are read sometimes, as long as the talk is really serious, and not wandering, especially as it gives the reserved parent another opportunity for speaking out.

In reading the Old Testament, every parent will, or should, come to some consistent decision about what he will teach as regards inspiration. I think it is our tendency to teach children to believe everything more literally than we do ourselves, and this may be well for little ones, but with older children we shall have to be careful that we are not so preparing them that future knowledge will bring about an earthquake in their faith.

Already we may find that they are less easily satisfied than we were in our own childhood; because it seems plain that future generations are not going to take a narrower view than the present generation. We find probably on looking back that our own standpoint has changed, perhaps at some cost to ourselves.

For my own part, I would sacrifice any faith in verbal inspiration rather than see the children doubt the justice and mercy of God. As an instance, "The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart" is a terrible stumbling block to a tender-hearted child, and if you were to take the impression made on the child's heart by this verse unexplained, I believe you would find a great

pity

[p 488]

for Pharaoh, because “how could he help being bad if God made his heart hard to show forth God’s glory.” Consequently, you find a doubt of God’s justice, and this is very sad. Then you explain, and perhaps say, “This was not a special hardening done to Pharaoh only. It means that all our hearts are so made by God that wilful sin hardens them, not God; God willeth *not* the death of a sinner.” It is possible that your children may not say as a child once said to me, “If that is what the Bible means, it is a pity it does not say so;” but if they do say it, or think it, you have to be prepared with a consistent answer.

In teaching the New Testament, there will not be exactly the same difficulty; but, oh, what responsibility the parents must feel! Here the children must find the strength for the battle of life. How can they know what it contains too well. And yet this is one difficulty that the teacher has to contend with in reading the Gospels. The children soon think that they know all the stories by heart. Probably, you will find that if you close their books, and ask them to tell you the story, you will be able to show them that they have forgotten some touching detail, some word or action with its help or example to us; but suppose they do know the words, then the teacher must prevent any weary feeling by bringing out all sorts of new lights, and studying the Gospels from every point of view: sometimes reading with a harmony of the Gospels; sometimes noticing the Old Testament quotations; sometimes gathering together all that can be found about our Lord’s divinity, about God’s kingdom in this world, or about life in the world to come. Read also the parables only, and make a list of what they teach us. And as for such difficulties as the cloak and the coat, and the second cheek turned to receive the blow, let them be solemn warnings for the present of our great shortcomings, and tell the children only to examine themselves, and find out how much lower their own conduct probably is, than even their own standard.

Above all, in our Gospel teaching let us try to make the Saviour a living Friend and Reality to our children. Among the stories of Cardinal Manning we read this, given by Mr. Waugh, in the Cardinal’s own words: “I was going down the street, and I met a little boy going along his happy way with poor dress, but a lovely thoughtful pale open face, and I stopped him for the pleasure of speaking to him. ‘Well, my little man, how are you, and where are you going with that bundle in your hand?’ He told me there, pointing to some houses being built, to his

[p 489] father. ‘What is your father?’ I asked. ‘A carpenter, sir,’ he replied.[sic] Then the Cardinal added, slowly, [sic] ‘I was awed and startled! I had met a carpenter’s son. My Lord was once a little servant like that boy. Oh, Mr. Waugh,” he exclaimed, almost in tears, “what depths of love were in Christ.” He then, in the simplest way, disclosed that he had at once returned home, and sent all that he then had to give to some institution for the children of the poor.

Now, if we can do this for our children—if we can make the life of Christ real and near to them, so that such a chance word as that which Cardinal Manning heard will go home to their hearts, so that they live as their baby hymn says, “Blest Jesus, near Thy side”—we shall have done our very best for them, and we shall have put into their hands the surest weapon of defence against sin and doubt.

We next come to the subject of the children’s devotions.

Very little ones begin to pray, and are pleased to be taught a few simple words. With the

first child the parents choose the time when their child seems intelligent enough to be taught, but the younger ones will do what they see the others doing. I find that I began to talk about God to my eldest child when she was two and a half, and read "Peep of Day" to her and heard her prayers regularly before she was three. My two next children, I find, said prayers by the time they were two, and could say or sing two or three hymns. My baby, now eighteen months old, goes and kneels down when her little sister says her prayers, puts her hands together, and says, "Father in Heaven." But I own I think two years old is too young to begin. Only it is a good rule never to let them remember the time when they didn't say their prayers. Every word has to be explained; and such words as "bless" and "grace" and "kingdom" are not understood at first. And when the Lord's Prayer is taught, frequent attention is needed to see that the little ones are giving any meaning to the words; and if they do not understand what they are saying, their thoughts are sure to wander.

With very little children we should perhaps be careful to avoid any misleading general confession of sin. I heard of a little boy so prompted looking up to say, "But indeed, mother, I've been a most excellent boy all day." I find also among my notes on my own children this entry: "She is afraid of her prayer being made a rebuke. If I say, 'Forgive Eleanor, and make her good,' she will say, 'Forgive Eleanor, and forgive mammy, and make her good, and zoo good.'" I have found

[p 490]

the words, "Forgive me when I am naughty, because Jesus Christ loves me," a form of words which avoids this. Little children, too, might shrink from their prayers if they were constantly made the occasion for bringing up the small misdeeds of the day. Of course occasionally there will have been outbreaks of naughtiness too serious to pass over without causing the child to ask especially for God's forgiveness, but this is often better done as soon as the naughtiness is over.

Some children are said to add remarkable petitions to their prayers. I have only read of this in books, and I have no experience of it: but I think if I heard a little child pray for something unsuitable, I should not pass it over, but explain to the child why it should not pray, say, for sugar-plums. At the same time, I would take advantage of every little event in a child's life to teach them the reality of prayer, and to prevent their prayers being a mere form. A new nursery-maid, a birthday, a little friend or a relation's illness, any one going on a journey—all these, and anything else that is filling the child's mind at the time, should find words in their prayers; and it is the same with older children.

When my children outgrew their baby prayers I gave them a little book with a list of subjects for prayer and left them to find their own words. It is such a list as any parent might draw up for their children. I also asked them to learn suitable verses of Psalms and hymns for prayer and praise—single verses which they could use at any time. And in the little book there are plenty of blank pages where they can write these down. With one child I find a prayer for every morning (or nearly every morning) in the daily Psalms—another often comes, and we say the Collect of the week together—or one can kneel down with a child and each say a favourite verse from a hymn. I do think, too, that children should hear their mother pray—at least, on each child's birthday, and in times of special family joy or sorrow.

In the little book I mentioned I gave the children also very simple instructions for self-examination. I think this is a difficult subject, and I must confess that I do not know how my

children carry it out. At the time of their preparation for confirmation, and when they become communicants, it will be necessary to see that they have any needful help. I have still to speak of the children's private reading. They will like, I think, to have the Gospels volume of the Commentary or a Harmony of the Gospels to keep in their bedroom, and there are volumes of readings from the Old Testament which might be useful. Parents can make

[p 491]

for their children a list of the easier passages in the Epistles, which they can read for themselves with a little thought. There are also books with short meditations (I might especially mention "Morning Stars" and [sic] Little Pillows"), and for morning use the daily text book, with two or three verses on one subject, and a verse of a hymn seems to me very helpful. It would be a delightful Sunday occupation for older children to make themselves a daily text-book.

I must say a few words separately about the schoolboys, who spend so much of their lives away from us.

The single verses of psalms and hymns are very useful to them in their daily prayers, and I think in the holidays the mother may see that the boys have such a store of verses that they cannot be at a loss for words when they pray. Then, surely, at least at the end of the holidays, we shall not let them leave us again without praying together—and during the holidays let us cling more closely to the Bible reading, and by preference choose to be reading in the New Testament, rather than in the historical parts of the Old Testament. The boys like the Old Testament heroes, but they are well taught at school in Bible History, and we shall do better to give them more spiritual teaching and the chance of asking questions which they would not ask at school. In fact, you must not be surprised if you find that your schoolboy has lost the habit of mingling the reading with talk and questions; but the long holidays may give him time to recover his freedom of speech. Then it is the schoolboys who need the most careful teaching about reverence. They are so likely to lose it at school; even through a false shame of appearing good their behaviour may be less reverent than their feelings. They, too, in the lightness of their hearts may bring home to their sisters or to the little boys the funny Bible riddle or parody, which is the jesting that more than everything else is not convenient and should be checked at once. Also, to return for one moment to the question of Sunday: ask your boys about Sundays at school, and find out whether there are idle hours leading to temptation and evil, especially on wet Sundays. Then, if possible, suggest some occupation. Give a reward for a diary regularly kept, which could be posted up on such wet Sundays, or ask them to keep a record of natural history, to be written out on Sundays. Ask for longer letters from them on wet Sundays, either, to yourself or to their friends, and urge them to read, and give them suitable books. With these few words about the often absent boys I have finished what I wished to say.

¹ An address read long ago before "neighbours," in a branch of the P.N.E.U.