

MERMIER THE EDUCATIONIST

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Fr. Pierre Marie Mermier was born in 1790 in Vouvarey in France. It was a time when France was blighted by the French revolution. One of the baneful consequences of the revolution was the virulent hatred towards the church. Anticlericalism leading to the persecution of priests posed a grave threat to the celebration of the Sacraments. It was not rarely that Antoinette Bastian, Mermier's mother hid fleeing priests in the barn where they clandestinely celebrated the Holy Eucharist. Mermier grew up witnessing these scenes. Naturally they left enduring images in his young impressionable mind. These early experiences might have played a part in choosing a life in the church.

A close study of his portraits will reveal a man of unflinching resolve. The penetrating gaze in his eyes bespeaks of a thoughtful mind. An intelligence insightfulness and a sense of realism that governed his life and all that he did, are truly remarkable. The grave unsmiling visage beguiles the warm thoroughly human person that he really was, and lends itself to a less favourable opinion of him.

Was Mermier an extra ordinary compelling specimen of the human species? He certainly was not. That is if we take the word 'extra ordinary' in its narrowest esoteric sense. But used in its loosest pedestrian sense is not every one 'extra ordinary' in some way?

The title I think that sits well on Mermier is 'an apostle of good will'. Goodwill. He had it in plenty. His lack of other endowments was to a large extent compensated and made up for by this quality. Come to think of it, wanting, nay, daring to send the first batch of the fledgling MSFS to India in 1845. Barely seven years after the foundation. The audacity of it! The child like eagerness behind it! The single-mindedness and simplicity of it! The passage of time and the witness of history show that this ordinary priest was gifted with an eagle vision.

The Congregation of the Missionaries of St. Francis De Sales has registered phenomenal growth during these 175 years. Mermier's nondescript enterprise whose origin was in obscurity now shines in full daylight splendor. He has been proved right in his intuitions that can be described in no other way than as preternatural.

Although many more things can be said using broad brush strokes, this piece of writing is expected to confine itself to Mermier as an Educationist. This along with other writings about him will set in relief the quintessential persona of our venerable Founder.

Mermier's Educational Psychology

Mermier was studious by nature. This trait was noticed when he was first appointed as an assistant in a parish. He was seen to be studying late into the night. Later when he was appointed at the Seminary at Melan near Annecy he gave himself to teaching wholeheartedly. He understood that education is a complex process that takes place between the teacher and the taught.

It is a delicate process as well. In education one is working on the mind of the person. It is a make or break situation. Unsound pedagogy and method can result in incomplete and faulty education. That can do incalculable damage to the intellectual health of the pupil.

A good teacher, Mermier argued, should be able to know the potential of the pupil. His/her aptitudes, tastes, inclinations, also limitations. The teacher should be able to empathize with the pupils and enthuse them. Academic rigour should be progressively brought into the educational process. Study is an activity that is deserving of the seriousness that is its due. Study should be made to become a pleasure and joy rather than a humdrum activity that eventually becomes burdensome.

The student is a *person*. His /her individuality and uniqueness has to be recognized, accepted and valued. There should be no hazarding of the individuality to make way for a collective identity. Their self-esteem should not be hurt. One is not to think that a child is not to be taken seriously. A child needs to be listened to. His/her legitimate desires and aspirations have to be validated. The human dimensions of the pupil's personality have to be nurtured. The spirit of the pupil should be helped to open to the sublime. For when we touch the sublime we somehow reach and touch the divine. For this reason along with inculcating scientific knowledge the pupils should be introduced to literature, music and other visual arts. This is how the soaring of the spirit takes place.

The Heart of Education is the Education of the Heart

Mermier's Educational philosophy may be pithily summed up by this dictum. The cerebral endeavors of the student are undoubtedly of serious importance. In our present age of tight competition in all professional fields without being a high achiever one is sure to fall by the way. But at the same time we need to help our students to cultivate all that is human and spiritual. The heart is associated with emotions and feelings. Emotions such as love, kindness, fellow feeling, the desire for service and sacrifice. It is quite possible that our educational institutions turn out people of high intellectual accomplishments. But these persons can be people without pity or compassion. People who are ruthless. Incapable of any greatness or gratitude. High on IQ (Intelligence Quotient) and low on EQ (Emotional Quotient). Intellectual automatons who tread rough shod on people. We come across people of sophistication (or is it pseudo-sophistication?). These very same people lack refinement. Sophistication is more external. It can be taught in finishing schools. Refinement is more interior and difficult to be taught. What we perhaps need more is refinement and not sophistication. Too much sophistication may be symptomatic of our own lack of refinement. A sign of our phoniness.

Education must aim at balancing the qualities of head and heart. A sharp intelligence, an unerring memory and a loyal heart. We need all three. St. Francis De Sales' spiritual vision had an enduring influence on Mermier. In shaping Mermier's convictions about pedagogy, faith in the essential goodness of all human persons was supreme. Grace shines on human nature. Therefore human beings are capable of self-transcendence. Pupils should be encouraged and persuaded to learn. But never put under too much constraint or regimentation. They should be helped to form convictions. They should be led to be enticed and enamored by the beauty and sublimity of great ideas. Scientific ideas, artistic ideas and ideas of sports and games. Students should be helped to contemplate these ideas. To find delight in them.

The creative side of the person should be enabled to unfold in the context of education. They should not become armchair critics and dwellers in ivory towers far removed from the burning issues of the society. Education should achieve a high degree of social commitment among student communities. Strong sense of patriotism should inhere the minds of the students.

Education for Social Transformation

Education, Mermier opined, should not be carried out in a vacuum. The tremendous potential for good in the youth has to be unleashed. The young people *are* very generous when they choose to be. They can be extremely sacrificing. We do have many instances of these. Unfortunately what we often get to hear about is the wantonness profligacy and mindless violence of our young people.

The educators should be able to motivate the students in such a way that this immense power for good is brought to bear upon the life of our nation. This becomes all the more important in the context of so much injustice violence and corruption at all levels. The young people can play a big role in shaping a more egalitarian just and peaceful nation. They should be at the forefront of all movements that have at their heart the larger interests and the greater good of the society. Every just and human cause they should find worthy for their espousal.

Education for Harmony

Mermier lived and worked more than a century and a half ago.(151years to be precise)The social and religious conditions were in many ways different from ours in India. But we will not be straying far afield if we try to contextualize Mermier's basic beliefs, to our situations. Humans should be harmonized and integrated beings.

This harmony has to be felt within oneself. A sense of serenity and self-possession. A sense being at peace with oneself. At peace with the world. A perpetually tumultuous mind is something we all would like to do with out. A heart that is a bubbling cauldron of malfeasance is the enemy of humanity.

\One of the goals of education should be to help the students achieve this harmony. This interior harmony is self- diffusive. It spreads itself to others. In a country like India where people of different faiths live cheek by jowl, this quality has the merits of a 'virtue'. One needs to be a fervent believer not a fanatic one. The difference between the two is really a big one. Appreciation and esteem for cultures and religious traditions of other communities, is an important value that our students must learn from our educational institutions.

Education for Stewardship

Being a Savoyard who loved the mountains and valleys of that picturesque land, nature was close to the heart of Mermier. It is only fitting that Mermier's educational vision should encompass this important aspect. Had he lived in our times environmental concerns would have definitely found a resonance in his heart and mind.

The fragile nature of our environment is being revealed to us in a most telling fashion every day. Global warming, climate change etc... are no longer just odd-sounding phrases discussed and debated by world leaders and the experts. The effects these phenomena have already begun to visit upon us in a tangible way. How our rivers and water bodies have been polluted! How our forests have been decimated! They tell their own sad tale.

Man was never meant to be *Master* of the nature. This idea perhaps came from an insufficient understanding of what is said in the book Genesis in the Bible in connection with creation. We are meant to be stewards. Care-takers and nurturers. We ought to have respect and love for the environment. There lies the saving grace for humanity. Every child should learn this important lesson. There isn't simply another way to saner and safer lives.

Conclusion

Fr. Pierre Marie Mermier the venerable founder of the Congregation of the Missionaries of St. Francis De Sales, was an inspiring teacher and an enlightened guide of the young people. As seen in the life of St. Francis de Sales there is no contradiction between academic accomplishment and an authentic life. Between scholarship and sanctity.

A human being is a many- splendored thing. True altruism can co-exist with the quest for self-fulfillment. Compassion and career can go together. Song and science can come out of the same lips.

One is said to be truly educated when these multicolored threads are dexterously interlaced to make the tapestry of life.

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