

SER127-004, M. Hilda Benson's Account of the Founding of the Dawson Street Teachers' Training College

The Training College, Dawson St.

Given by M.M. Hilda Benson,

"What is the highest, the most profound, the most general, the most simple conception of education? It is this: to cultivate, to train, to develop, to strengthen and to polish all the physical, intellectual, moral & religious faculties which constitute nature & human dignity in the child. Education is culture & exercises, instructions & study. The teacher cultivates, instructs & labours outwardly but it is essentially necessary that there should be exercise, application, labour within. In education what the teacher does himself is a trifling matter; what he causes to be done is everything. Whoever does not understand this understands nothing of the work of human education, "The Child" by Monseigneur Dupanloup.

These words might have been those of Rev. Mother Gonzaga Barry, so often did she refer to them, so unvaryingly act according to their teaching.

In 1872 all help hitherto given by the government to denominational schools was withdrawn, so that Catholics, while forced to support State Institutions, by means of rates & taxes, found themselves heavily burdened in the conscientious endeavour to support Catholic education so essential to the welfare of their children. Divorced from religion, school teaching becomes a money making drudgery & the system of pupil teachers, with which the State sought to economise its weakness proved, in unintelligent hands, a source of the greatest danger. Before all others this was painfully realised by M.M. Gonzaga, & with characteristic zeal she set to work to cope with the situation, & her efforts succeeded indeed in drawing good from evil.

Secular teachers had to be obtained for Catholic Schools. But even partially trained secular teachers it was impossible to obtain, & partially trained teachers would never be allowed to experiment on the young souls confided to M.M. Gonzaga for guidance & training. "We will train our own teachers," she said, "and make them at the same time thorough, conscientious, valiant women."

So on the 23rd Jan 1884 a Training College was opened in Dawson St. "A Catholic Training College" as the prospectus stated "whose aim is to supply efficient teachers for Catholic Schools, by training young girls who intend to adopt teaching as a profession."

It was directed by a member of the Institute, who, coming from one of the most successful Training Colleges in England, that of Notre Dame, Liverpool, with the highest diplomas from the English Education Board, fully understood the peculiar needs of such a work. Candidates were to be admitted from the age of 14, the full course of training extending over a period of 5 years. During the first 3 yrs candidates were to be considered as Pupil Teachers. They would be employed for some hours daily in learning the science & art of teaching as exemplified in the schools but the greater part of the day was devoted to study – school management gradually developing side by side with general instruction in school subjects.

Eleven [14] students were admitted during their first [2] years & soon it was found advisable to establish 6 scholarships open to competition for candidates from any part of the colonies. A work about these 11 pioneers may not be uninteresting. Like all who lead the van of a great cause, they came in for a full share of all the inconveniences incident to those who open up a virgin country, but,

as their Mistress of Method said of them more than 50 years later, “Nobler girls it would be impossible to find.” Two became members of the I.B.V.M., upholding the honour of their fair southern land, one beneath the snows of the Himalayas, Darjeeling, India...