



50. The Importance of Reverence in the Educational Process

In the previous text we have already come across the three criteria on which Fr Kentenich based his “Teaching on the Principles of a Modern Asceticism for Youth”: They were policy, tactics and consistency. The clear policy refers to the ethical fundamental attitude of the educator: Priestly fatherliness, or priestly motherliness.

By “tactics” Fr Kentenich meant the fundamental attitude guiding the educational process. It is determined by the two components: love and reverence. Of these reverence takes on special significance in our times. This is the reason for the emphasis in the following text.

It is taken from “Ethos und Ideal in der Erziehung” – Ethos and Ideals in Education, Vallendar 1972, p. 231-246.

In the following talks we want to go into the individual **principles of [educational] tactics**. I want to emphasise three principles:

1. The art of opening up. We all know from experience how important and difficult this is. What do I have to open up? The heart of the person before me.
2. The art of listening, especially the art of attentive listening and picking up the unspoken.⁵⁶
3. The art of enlightened guidance.

These are the three principles of [educational] tactics.

This evening we want to discuss the limits and possibilities of tactics.

[Feelings of resistance to the word “tactics” in the educational process]

⁵⁶ *Heraushören*

Why am I drawing your attention to the limits of tactics? For the reasons just mentioned: A feeling of resistance simply has to arise if you only hear the word “tactics”. Perhaps the feeling of resistance will be modified if we tell ourselves: It is a loan word, and there is usually something extreme in such loan words.

Consider for a moment which other loan words are also used in pedagogy. We have taken the word “tactics” from the military sciences; we talk of the educator as a master builder, as a great gardener, as a good shepherd. When you contemplate such images and loan words, you will soon find that there are very few concepts that are taken from the animal kingdom. One concept is obvious: the good shepherd. But the associations are positive.

If we distinguish between the three levels of being – animal, sentient and intelligent life – you would think that it would be more obvious to take loan words from sentient life. Why do we object to comparisons with animals? It awakens associations with an “animal trainer”. Then the danger is really great that as time goes by we become “human trainers”. This may not happen. We want to form and mould people, and allow them to grow organically from within, helping to form them from within.

So, as I have said, these considerations could help to modify our feelings of resistance to some extent. However our resistance will be completely dispelled by a philosophical argument:

Where are the limits? Think of the two elements: fatherliness and the ideal. These are the two posts. What are tactics? The art of applying the two elements correctly and allowing them to influence each other.

[The limits of tactics]

May I analyse this objective limit in psychological terms? Where are the limits in my soul that determine the application of tactics? The answer is: Reverence and love. From where does love flow? From fatherliness. From where does reverence flow? From my commitment to the ideal of those entrusted to my care.

So if we have these two limiting posts deep in our soul, and apply these tactics, we will never use people as a means to an end; we will never apply tactics in the negative sense; we will never treat people “psychologically”. That is absolutely wrong. A noble-minded person cannot endure being treated psychologically.

However, this picks up a thought that is essential for a true educator.

[Reverence and love]

If reverence and love are at work in an educator, they in turn generate reverence and love in the person being educated. If these two posts are present on both sides, they achieve the impossible. If reverence and love are answered by reverence and love in the person being educated, it is easy for a very fine relationship to come about. Perhaps I should add that every form of education, both of a young child and an adult, always presupposes these two emotions: reverence and love. It could happen that the emphasis is placed on one or the other; it could happen that at one time reverence is more in the foreground, and at another it is love. However, both must be present all the time. This also includes our relationship to a toddler, or an infant. Both must be present in an education: not just love, but also reverence; and not just a certain measure of reverence. A child deserves to receive the greatest reverence.

If we have to educate mothers, we should point out that they may not deny their children, even the smallest children, the expression of sound maternal love.

Individual psychologists are said to have observed that many people are unable to express their emotions later in life because they were treated like inferior beings. They experienced unconsciously, instinctively, that they were inferior, because they were not allowed to give and receive what only a child can give and receive at that age: corresponding childlike or maternal tenderness. So parents have to show their child this tenderness, on the one hand as an expression of love, and on the other, as a sign of reverence.

This does not mean that we should instruct parents to constantly slobber over their children. This would be an expression of love that is not disciplined by reverence. Both have to be present all the time: Reverence and love.

This also applies to the age group we are dealing with at present: teenagers. Also here we have to show girls both reverence and love. If we manage to receive this double emotion in response – again, reverence and love – education is secured. We will then achieve something great and profound in our children in all circumstances. However, the greatest feat consists in this: How can we preserve reverence and love for girls just at this age, and on the other hand, to win from them their reverence and love?

In order to reach our goal quickly, let us exclude love for the moment. It is not as though love isn't necessary. It is absolutely necessary, also at this age. However, in treating our whole subject we want to concentrate at the moment on reverence, because it seems to me that reverence is more necessary than love.

Of course, if we see the two emotions as part of an organism, we know that there can be no love without reverence, and no reverence without love. However, if we want to distinguish between the two, and integrate them into the present-day mentality of the people, we can state: Today the essential thing in education, especially with our young people, is reverence; my reverence that generates an echo of reverence on their part.

In this context allow me to pose two questions and answer them in general outline:

1. How can I educate myself to be reverent towards a teenager?
2. How can I educate the young people in their most difficult years to show reverence to me?

You may not think that I am now going to give you a “recipe” of how to educate others to show reverence. That won't bring us to our goal. If we do it consciously, a noble-minded young person will never have any respect for us. So:

[1. How can I educate myself to be reverent towards young people?]

You may enlarge the subject right away. The answer I give can be applied everywhere, that is, also with the adults I have to deal with, and to whom I may be a [spiritual] father or superior. It can also be applied, and must be applied, even to infants.

To start with, let me give three answers. Actually it is a matrix of answers that aim above all at reshaping us in the depths of our souls. So what do I have to do?

Firstly:

1.1 Repeatedly re-orientate myself to the true meaning of education.

What is education? It means serving someone else's original character selflessly. That is the art of arts to educate people, to form and mould people's souls.

You may not say as Goethe, for example, said in his "Prometheus": "Here I sit and form people in my image and likeness." I am not the goal of education. The ideal of education is this: Here I sit and form people according to your image and likeness.

God has incorporated his own idea into each human soul. Through each individual person God wants to embody and carry out an idea. My task as educator consists in discovering God's idea, and employing my strength and abilities to help this idea to be embodied and carried out in the life of each person.

Can you understand what I am trying to say? The more I immerse myself inwardly in the true meaning of education, the more strongly my reverence for others will grow.

Secondly:

1.2 This inner attitude must find expression as time goes by in practical and tactical reverence.

So it must show in treating others reverently, and in a reverent attitude of soul.

I must, therefore, show reverence

1. for every human being,
2. for the fate of every human being,
3. for the originality and ability of every human being.

The thought echoes all the time: God's great idea is the focal point. God cast each person as an idea into the universe, and he wants to see this idea increasingly embodied and completed.

So **firstly**, practical and tactical **reverence for every human being**, even if that person is the most ragtag person I have met, even if that person is the most sickly person I have encountered, even if that person is psychologically and physically as sickly as can be! Show reverence for every person!

Secondly, show reverence for the fate of every human being, even if I encounter the fate of a person who had gone through the deepest night, through the deepest guilt. Show reverence for the fate of every human being. I have no idea what sort of childhood this person has had. I have no idea what inherited traits this poor human being brings along.

If we are honest, if we are only a bit objective and truthful, we will have to say: If I was in that person's skin, if I had had that past behind me, how would I stand today? So, show reverence for the fate of each human being.

Thirdly, also show reverence for each person's abilities. That is the great thing. True fatherliness does not place itself at the centre of things; it does not want to grow personally. If God has placed an ability in someone, everything in genuine fatherliness urges us to help these abilities to mature, even if the person concerned later surpasses us.

There is absolutely nothing greater in education than to see that those whom I have educated are now standing on my shoulders. I have become superfluous.

However, you may not look upon these ideals as lovely platitudes; you must also see them profoundly in their context, act upon them, and take your bearings from them. We must also be

careful when we have to decide upon someone's future. For example, if we belong to a religious community, we may not simply say: Here is a hole, someone has to fill it. It will mean that another hole is created, so again someone has to fill that hole. How often that is done! And then you talk about treating people personally. How much unhappiness is created in this way! You may not say, for example: Holy obedience requires it. Holy obedience requires us to prepare ourselves in the depths of our souls for such treatment, it is true. However, it also requires the superiors to be intelligent people who do not abuse their power. If the others have given us their wills, it is our holy duty to appreciate each person according to his or her abilities. Hence reverence for everyone's abilities.

Of course, you can also apply these thoughts to our relationship to one another. How often we see in Catholic circles that a person's originality has no chance to come through. Just imagine, someone has achieved something really nice, for example, has written a booklet and put their name to it. His or her colleagues say right from the start: It's no good! However, if there is no name, or a penname, on the cover, they say: That's excellent! Or, if someone has the ability to write poetry or hold talks, their immediate neighbours may not hear about it, because they will be sure to rubbish it. One has to be a really strong character if one is to make one's way under such opposition. And that is rare. Such abilities have to be cultivated with great care. However, this requires tremendous selflessness. We may not centre on ourselves, but on God and the wellbeing of those whom God has entrusted to us and allowed to cross our path.

Fourthly, we have to protect ourselves from the deadly enemy of true reverence.

Do you know what that is? It is using a template. Don't introduce a template into education!

St Thomas coined the saying in the Middle Ages: Prelates should not make so many laws. Please don't create a whole host of laws! Please don't use a template! Because if a template rules things, we have killed all originality, every individuality, as well as true reverence.

Do I mean to say that we should not support faithfulness to the law vigorously? Of course not! If there is a community, if people are together, there have to be laws. However, there may only be very few laws, and the few laws have to be enforced with draconian strictness. Every noble-minded person expects this. But a template is something quite different.

A template implies constant force, which is repeatedly enforced by new laws, just as people did at the time of Jesus with the traditions of the ancients. The law is explained, and the explanation takes on the character of another law. And the explanation is again explained, and again this explanation becomes a new law. And so it continues until one is walled in with greater and lesser laws, and one no longer dares to breathe.

If you hold onto what has been said, you will have some principles with which to protect and deepen our reverence for those entrusted to our care.

[2. How can we educate young people to show us reverence?]

Now comes a second question, although it may not appear to be very important. How can we educate those entrusted to our care to show us reverence?

When I give you the answer, you will understand better how circumspectly and complexly I apply the word "tactics". It is not done deceptively; quite the opposite, because a noble-minded person cannot bear being deceived.

Once again I give three answers.

2.1 First answer, by exemplifying the ideal of the person concerned

That is a fundamental attitude, not a means applied deceptively. If I personally exemplify the ideal of the young people, you will see how this creates reverence.

By the way, you may not take it amiss if a young person misbehaves. That is an expression of temperament. You may not be over-sensitive about it. This applies in general, even when we are dealing with mature people. To the extent that I honestly try to embody the ideal of the others, I will be educating them to show me reverence. If I don't do this, I can't imagine how this fine connection can be set up by both sides.

[2.2 Believe in the good in the young person]

Secondly, and this is most important: Continue to believe in the good in the young person under all circumstances.

Or, apply this in general: Continue to believe in the good in people. These are not quack remedies in the sense of considering things on the sly, or in the sense of outwitting people. How could it be? Continue to believe in the good in people! Allow me to add:

1. despite the many disappointments we experience,
2. despite all the aberrations we have to experience,
3. despite the constant battles we have to witness in our children.

Absolutely nothing may undermine our faith in the good in people.

Shall I tell you why?

Church teaching tells us that although human nature has been weakened by original sin, it has not been fatally undermined. There is still a great deal of good in people. So it is something honest, objective, if we continue to believe in the good in people. On the whole we are dealing with graced young people and children, those who have been given a share in the divine life through baptism. This is another reason for not losing our faith in the good in people.

Do you know who could be our highest ideal in this regard? I think it is St Francis de Sales. I am setting aside the Blessed Mother and Jesus Christ for the moment.

It is the fundamental attitude of St Francis' asceticism. He held onto his faith in the good in people. That is why he believed that also people in the world can become holy, including people living in a castle. He did not think that in order to become holy we have to enter a convent. No, faith in the good in people inspired his asceticism. And what probably does us the most good is his inner conviction: I also believe in the good in woman. Since he believed in the good in womanhood, he got the idea to found communities that could and did live and strive for holiness in the world without the strict dictates of the vows. At the time he was unable to get this accepted, but you can nevertheless see his great attitude: to believe in the good in people.

[2.2.1 Believe in the good despite disappointments]

We want to uphold our faith in the good in people, firstly, despite countless disappointments. Perhaps you know from experience that if someone always says or acknowledges: "I no longer

believe in you ...”, everything within us is choked. Therefore, please try to maintain your faith in the good in people!

[2.2.2 Believe in the good despite aberrations]

Secondly, preserve your faith in the good in people even when a whole host of aberrations can be listed.

As a psychologist I have to say that such aberrations in young people are by no means always so dangerous. To start with they have to be interpreted in the terms of developmental psychology. Seen psychologically it means that here a person’s desire to assert himself makes itself felt. The young person suddenly feels: Here are obstacles. Who are the obstacles? The parents, father and mother. What is the result? One is repulsive.

What can we do about it?

Now comes the important law: Allow people to do stupid things; I may not make use of my ultimate authority. I have to protect young people from blunders, but I may allow them to do stupid things. However, I may only not allow those things I know will really harm them. Didn’t we do the same when our parents told us to do this or that? We didn’t believe them until we had experimented for ourselves.

At any rate, I think you should not consider such lapses so dire. Outwardly, for the sake of discipline, we have to intervene, but inwardly please don’t become too harsh. It is essential in this context that if I have to hurt them,⁵⁷ I must do it out of a sense of duty, and not because I am disproportionately annoyed.

Something else! Why may we not take these things too seriously in this age-group? Perhaps you have observed it for yourselves in life. In psychological and pedagogical terms it is called **opposition to established life experience**. You will often find that children do not want to take up the same profession as their parents. Why? Their parents have lived their lives, and the following generation wants to live something different to what their parents have lived. You will be able to explain many things from this life process. Especially, we should not take it so seriously if the young generation expresses feelings of revulsion for the older generation. That has always happened, also in convents.

The master-stroke consists in leading the young people further. Otherwise we will achieve the opposite effect. Of course, it is true, we have lived through a time when the youth were in rebellion. But that is not a tragedy.

St Benedict once observed that in the Chapter the abbots should listen very particularly to the young monks, because from time to time they also have the Holy Spirit.

Why do I say this? We have to re-discover a sound tension, so we shouldn’t think we have a lease on wisdom. We must also listen to others.

I have amassed all these facts in order to prove to you that we must also believe in the good in people despite their aberrations. By this I am not saying that we should intentionally allow our spiritual children to fall. That is not meant. But we should not take it so seriously if aberrations happen.

⁵⁷ This was Fr Kentenich’s way of speaking about punishment, or a reprimand. He rejected corporal punishment totally.

[2.2.3 Believe in the good despite sharp battles]

Finally, also believe in the good in people when the battles become and remain sharp. Allow me to add: Don't spare our children these battles! If we start doing this, we will educate them to be immature. I guarantee that if you spare those entrusted to your care from battling, either by solving their difficulties too quickly, or by involuntarily throwing the weight of your personality into the balance in order to spare them the struggle, the result will be that honest people will thank God on their knees when you die, or are no longer part of their lives. Please take this seriously. Outwardly it is nevertheless possible for them to pretend how much they love and respect us. You may not believe it. So see to it that each one battles through his or her own battles.

Although I also say: I want to know about everything. But intervene? The idea doesn't even occur to me! I don't intervene. They can turn head over heels as much as they like. The only thing is not to let them fall deeply. Otherwise they won't become strong characters. We won't be educating them for life. Otherwise we are educating dolls, but not people who can stand their ground in life.

That is a second great means we have to apply in order to educate the people we are caring for to show reverence for us: to continue to believe in the good in people.

[2.3 Make ourselves superfluous]

Thirdly, we have to make ourselves superfluous in every respect, at least as an attitude.

How can I do this? What is its effect? As soon as I notice that someone can manage on their own, I withdraw. They have to manage on their own. I can try to discover if they then take a tumble. And if they do take a tumble, I wait to see whether they can get up again. Then I allow them to get up on their own. I don't bat an eyelid! You must at any rate make yourselves superfluous. If you never want to become superfluous, you have always to make yourself superfluous.

So, firstly, **as soon as I notice that someone wants to be independent, I consciously withdraw**. It is better to begin too soon than too late.

Secondly, and this is also essential, never try to be popular with the person being educated. Never say: Become attached to me! It is far better to say brusquely: If you want to leave, get out! There's the door! – How does that sound? I think it is very sound. If you court their favours, noble-minded people will always do the opposite. They may perhaps remain outwardly polite, but they will very quickly begin to manipulate you. Then you will not be educating them, you will be educated and made to look a real fool. So that is the second consideration.

With that we have defined the boundaries for applying [educational] tactics. It would be good if you would think over for yourselves what I have said. .