

THEY CALL IT EDUCATING THE IMAGINATION

A unique experiment in religious education is going on at the Ecumenical Institute, a division of the Church Federation of Greater Chicago. The faculty members of the Institute are attempting to teach theological concepts through the use of art forms and carefully structured discussion. They have practised their teaching methods on adult laity, youth and clergy for some ten years and the response has enabled them to set up weekly programs for about 2,000 participants a year.

Recently they completed a special two-year series of courses for inner-city and suburban high school students to test their methods and curriculum on youth from different economic and cultural levels. The results were published in March of this year and can be described as highly significant for the process of education in general and of religious education in particular.

Through their courses, some 500 young people from twenty-eight schools were inspired to re-think their concepts of themselves and their participation in society. The suburban youth, living in an environment where success as an assumed goal in life means financial gain, were encouraged to consider giving their lives in some form of real service to mankind. The inner-city youth, forced to live in an environment where a tragic sense of being a victim of circumstances kills all initiative, were enabled to find something of worth in themselves as human beings and a real hope for becoming something other than "bumbs", as they phrased it.

The Institute calls their teaching program "the education of the imagination." Man does not live by models of his external environment alone, but also by deep personal pictures or images of himself. The answer to the question "Who am I?" ~~determines~~ in the context of his environment determines what he becomes and does. The current revolutions in culture, technology and the expression of religion itself have necessitated a change in man's self-image. The imagination of man is caught in the tension between the no-longer and the not-yet. New understandings, new images need to be forged and the

Institute's program is designed to aid an individual to do just that. It aims at enabling the student to discover and create images of himself in his real world which will motivate him to free, intelligent and responsible involvement in civilization.

The youth project took 28 groups of from 20 to 25 high school students (in the inner-city gangs, most were high school drop-outs) and exposed them to their beginning and later advanced courses in a series of six weekly evening sessions for each course. They met in local churches, YMCAs or club rooms in all sections of urban and suburban Chicago. For the beginning course, suburban and inner-city youth met in their own groupings. For the advanced courses, they met together.

The first course is entitled "The Image of Selfhood in Post-Modernity" ~~and is a study in the image~~ and deals with the problems of authentic self-understanding, decision-making, vocational significance, human relations and genuine participation in civilization. In brief, it endeavors to enable the participants to think through for themselves who they are and how they can involve themselves in the present age.

The second course is entitled "The Cultural Revolution in the Modern World" and is an analysis of the historical upheavals that are altering the direction of civilization. This includes the intellectual stance in the modern scientific revolution; the reformulation of styles of life in the urban-technological revolution; and the change in basic human mood in the world-wide secular revolution of our time. The course intends to provide a new grasp of the post-modern world.

The class sessions are conducted in a serious atmosphere of intense thought. A ritual begins each class, designed to set the mood for the Evening's discussion. Sometimes this is a rhythmic snapping of the fingers, sometimes choral reading.

Following this, the instructor reviews the previous session and talks

briefly on the present topic. Then the group is exposed to a carefully selected art piece --- a painting, a cartoon, selections of poetry, a variety of folk music, a motion picture.--- also related to the evening's topic. The use of art is highly important in the courses and was responsible for some of the most significant progress. Art is not only the creature of the imagination, but also its midwife. It is deeply human. The art of a people is the means whereby old and inadequate common images are challenged. It is also the catalyst through which fresh, useful pictures of existence are forged. They interpret the external times and disclose the unnoticed internal states of being. In showing Picasso's cataclysmic masterpiece "Guernica," one inner-city youth was moved to say of it --- "That's where I live." In the motion picture "High Noon", many suburban youth experienced the realization that one may have to risk death to live meaningfully.

A CALL TO ARMS!

What difference do I make? Why should I get any more involved in society when my own way of living is complicated enough? Aren't I doing the best I can? I feel picked on already --- hit from all sides by causes and projects and work that needs to be done. They only confuse me. Life didn't used to be ~~xxx~~ like this. Things were simpler in the past --- just "help your neighbor and live a good life." That I can understand. But today? How? There's too much --- too many ways --- too many people --- too many problems --- too many changes~~xxx~~. God knows I try. Why can't the way to live be clearer? Why does everything have to be so difficult?

The plaintive cry of a 20th century individual caught in the throes of an age that knows no parallel in history. No time has changed ways of living so radically and left human beings so confused. The old answers don't seem to apply. There are too many new ones to choose among. To live a meaningful life in this age is hard work with constant tension and anxiety a part of the process. Must it be so?

Undoubtedly the answer is YES. No scientist, politician, doctor, minister or social worker has a formula for escaping it entirely. Help can be given ~~by~~ but the problems cannot be eradicated. The individual still must make his own decisions, not between commonly accepted rights and wrongs as was the pattern in the past, but between all kinds of rights and many unclear wrongs.

Anyone asking questions about life and meaning, consciously or unconsciously, would find a clearer understanding of himself and society at The Ecumenical Institute, a theological training school and research center in the heart of Chicago. Through intensive weekend courses for adult men and women, the profound insights of some of the Church's greatest thinkers are used to illuminate some of the darkness --- dispell some of the confusion and direct an open individual toward seeing himself as worth-while in the masses of humanity about him and his life as significant in the civilizing process.

WHY BOTHER....

- ...with theology?
- ...with education now that I'm grown up?
- ...with understanding the society we live in any better than I do?
- ...with facing reality when escapes seem so much easier?
- ...with worrying about my responsibility toward the problems of society?
- ...with whether or not I've got anything to offer?
- ...with discussing life with people who may not agree with me?
- ...with anything that may change me?

Why? Because as a Christian, I have to.

Theology is "the knowledge of God" and this I need to have a relevant faith and not a collection of sayings about being a good person.

A knowledge of God means learning about Him and about His creation.

This is an on-going process. Education is never completed just because I am not in school.

Understanding society is necessary for serving it --- the task of a Christian. This, too, is an on-going process.

Reality is of God and no matter how I try, I cannot escape Him, His love or His judgement.

As a Christian, I must "love my neighbor," I have to care about society and its problems. I am responsible to my brother.

As a Christian, I cannot belittle my contribution to society no matter how inadequate it seems to me. I have God-given resources which can be used to serve Him through others.

Not everyone agrees completely with what needs to be done, why or how to do it. But a Christian cannot afford not to cooperate with others when the needs are so great.

I do not need to be afraid of change in myself. Life in this century means change. Faith itself must be dynamic, not dead or static. Change can bring doubt and confusion and it can bring greater oppor-

tunity to understand God, life, people and myself. Such a risk is worth the effort.

All of these necessities in life as a Christian are incorporated into the weekend courses sponsored by The Ecumenical Institute, a theological training school and research center in the heart of metropolitan Chicago. ~~At~~ The Institute courses take theological concepts about life and society and ~~incorporate these into~~ through the means of contemporary art forms and serious discussion, confronts the participant with ~~the realization~~ an image of himself as a valuable ~~or~~ contributor to the civilizing process. This enables a person to make intelligent decisions, intentional decisions, about how he is going to live and why. The Institute is a division of the Church Federation of Greater Chicago and a pioneering arm in the renewal of the Church for the sake of its mission to society. Lay men and women who understand who they are and the milieu in which they live are agents of inestimable value ~~to~~ in any project or program for a better world.

In the enclosed folder, you will find a description of the Institute's courses for the coming weeks. We invite you to join us, to attend one of the courses described and to embark on an adventurous inquiry into the wonder and mystery of life itself.
