

The Dalhousie Gazette

They call it a school

The government of tyrants cannot last long because it is hateful to the multitude, and what is against the wishes of the multitude cannot be long preserved.

- St. Thomas Aquinas



By KIM CAMERON
If their homework isn't done, if their tie isn't on, if their books aren't in a bookbag, if any one of a hundred other 'rules' are broken, they know what's waiting for them; out in the hall, so that the other kids can hear but not see, they'll be taught about this moral society of ours by a teacher who will probably squeeze into his busy schedule the time to physically strap several hundred twelve or thirteen year old kids.

They call it a school, St. Thomas Aquinas School. It is located one block from Dalhousie University. And although it seems impossible, it is even more typical than it is repulsive.

The body of this story is an interview with twelve students at St. Thomas Aquinas School. They are all boys; they are all Catholics; they are all very serious. The issue of discipline and authority in their school has become their most important concern. Their tone is one of desperation, because there is no one who they can turn to for help. Their church, their families, and their school are all engaged in a deeply rooted battle with them. All the students are asking for is a minimum of courtesy, a minimum of responsibility, a minimum of freedom. All they are getting is a reinforcement of one of the most brutal and perverted traditions of our society: education through violence and fear.

The interview is sometimes stilted, but these are the words, transcribed from a recording, of thirteen and fourteen year old kids. The humour is black humour; the emotion is real emotion. But the message is inescapable and clear: how in God's name or not, can we call the incredibly violent and oppressive process which they are being forced to undergo, 'education.'

"The great spy network..."

"For one thing, the church is in the schools, and the schools are in the church. Both of them are in your home. There's no way you can do anything without every old bag in the parish knowing about it. Teachers know everything about you; you don't have any private life. You would think that once you're out of school, that's it. But they make what you do off the schoolgrounds their business - you can get the strap for anything."

"These teachers - they're involved in what you did in the summer - they know what you did, and

they hold it against you. The old bags in the parish are like a spy network. Anything we do, they phone the Sisters and give them the word." "Sometimes on the weekend, we go down to this field, and just talk and maybe play football - that's all. Last Sunday, the Nuns came down in their car, and drove around a few times to see what we were doing. What are they, teachers or a morality squad?"

"I was walking to school, and I was on the corner there, and this Sister comes up to me and says 'spit out your gum.' So I spit out my gum. What is this anyway?" "I wouldn't have spit it out. I would have told her so." "Sure you would have. What are you? Crazy or something?"

"The pencil is mightier than the..."

"They accuse us of being slap-happy. They're strap-happy."

"I turned around in school and asked this guy if I could borrow a pencil - I got the strap - once for talking in class, and once for not having a pencil."

"Yeah, you get if for forgetting your book." "Like, I went to the store at recess time, Oh no, you can't go to the store at recess time. You'll just get gyped. They save us from getting gyped by selling us apples at the bargain price of ten cents each. I don't know how we could protect ourselves without them."

"You don't get the strap for everything, though. Like if you get caught smoking, you don't get the strap. You just get expelled, that's all."

"Actually, you don't have to take the strap if you don't want to. It's quite fair. If you want to, you can get expelled instead. You've got your choice. Get strapped or get expelled. For borrowing a pencil."

"If you walk across the lawn there, the best chance is that you'll get the strap. What lawn there is."

"If it's raining out, and you get caught putting your books inside, before the bell rings, you get your head beaten in. So they get around that by using bookbags. If you don't bring your bookbag, you see, they get you for that - all year."

"I don't mind schoolbags that much, but its the way they enforce it. Like this guy didn't have one, and his parents were away and he couldn't get one; so what did they do? They made him stand in line all period. You miss schooltime. You could have learned something, you know? And then they blame you for not knowing your work."

"And this guy, he has a bunch of kids who go to the school in his family, and they all have to have bookbags, and his parents can't afford them, so what happens? Everybody else takes school bags, and his family takes boxes. Who says there's no discrimination. He sticks out like a bloody thumb."

How would you feel?

"We try to tell them. We plead with them. Once, when the principal was in the room, we had a panel about discipline. She didn't even listen. She didn't even bother to listen."

"They get in the class, and they think we're nothing. One day I put up my hand to go to the bathroom. I kept it up there till I was getting sick. He wouldn't answer me; the bastard wouldn't answer me. I know he knew what I wanted to do because he said something about going between classes. I agree. But I'm only human. If I'd left I don't know what he would have done to me."

"What do they think they are? Just because they went through the system without cracking, they think they have the right to do it to us too. I want to learn as much as anyone else, but I just can't take that school. Its like Hitler. You give someone too much power and they go crazy."

"It's like a flock of crows"

"If they decide, from some divine pity, that they're not going to strap you, they give you slips."

"This teacher gives us slips. Not once has she even explained what they're for - she doesn't have time to teach you what you're doing wrong, even to talk it over. She just waits till the end of the class, and then hands them out, like a relief line. Slips, slips, slips, slips..."

"I got about ten slips, and I don't know what about half of them are for. The new teachers just want to show off how well they can discipline their classes - they don't care if they can teach - just if they can control the class."

"The teachers like that are just useless. If they are going to take a class, they might as well learn how to do it right. But are you kidding? I'd hate to meet the people who taught them how to teach. Something's wrong. Something's wrong."

"Some teachers - say you do something. They won't tell you. That afternoon, or the next day, that's when you get it. Correct you, no; punish you, sure."

"One teacher always runs over to the teacher across the hall. Then she runs down to the principal. Then all three of them run back to the class. It's like a flock of crows."

"The principal's one of the best ones, though. She's old fashioned, but she knows what she's doing. But you know. You can't wear sneakers. You can't wear certain kinds of socks. You can't wear jeans or short skirts. And you can't wear sweaters... You can freeze your body off but you can't wear a sweater. In the bottom classrooms, its just unbelievable."

"I swear half of the teachers just go there to strap and hand out slips. I bet they keep a

score, notched in the end of their bed. You don't know what its like to meet a teacher who's there to teach. Its the only thing that makes it possible to hack it."

"Yeah, except you go in there and you get so mad, and nervous, you can't work anyway. You just have no say in the hole, so that's what it becomes, a hole."

"It's a joke now, but it wasn't at the time"

"We were going down the hall to an assembly, and this teacher was going the other way. Well, its just common courtesy to move out of the way - so this kid told the class to move out of her way, and the teacher gave him a slip."

"Some of the teachers are just rude pigs. And there's nothing you can do about it. You just have to sit there. Like this one guy. You ask him something, and he says, 'Hey you. Shut up, or 'shut your ugly trap.' He isn't even original. He just has two lines."

"A friend of mine was going on a retreat, so I asked the teacher if I could get his books. So as I'm carrying the books out, he says, 'Hurry up and get out of here.' Jese, it makes me sick."

"Call a student by his first name? Are you kidding? They only know him for a year." "This one teacher just makes you write things for him, as punishment. Then he tears it up in front of you. Just like that. He tears it up."

"They make all sorts of accusations, and don't give you a chance to defend yourself. Like, this one guy was accused of glue-sniffing, because he hung around with these guys who glue-sniffed. But did they tell him to his face? No. They told all the teachers, they told everyone, and they never told him, and he didn't even have a chance to defend himself."

"They'll get some little guy down there, some little guy who doesn't have much will power, and they'll try to suck information out of him, just like sucking blood. It's like a prison."

"The police come right down to the school, and try to get the information out of you. They even told us once they were going to take us down to the station and throw us in a big cell with rats in it and everything. It's a joke now, but it wasn't at the time."

"And they've trained our mothers to look through our bookbags for notes when we get home."

"Protestant girls carry bicycle chains..."

"We have a beautiful hall there, a gymnasium, and we're not allowed to use it."

"They leave it there to rot." "We asked the parish priest if we could use the church hall. He said, 'No. You always make so much racket that I can't stand it.' The kids in almost all of the other schools get to use some hall; why can't we?"

"Yeah, why can't we use the gym in the school? The janitor is there until eleven o'clock some nights, and the NUNS just live on Oxford. They could take turns coming down, say once a month each, and do some other work while we're there. They'd have to sacrifice the convenience of an office once a month, and that would be pretty demanding. It would never work."

"You know, every now and then, they do give us the gym for a dance. Once the student council asked them if the boys could bring guests to the dance, and they were so scared, they were scared to walk out of there, weren't they?"

"Yeah. They think if a boy invites a girl from another school, the hall's going to be torn apart. I wanted to invite this girl from the protestant school. What, do they think protestant girls carry bicycle chains?"

"They want us to go out with girls from our school, cause they're Catholic. But the girls at our school are so ugly."

"They're not ugly. The only reason that they're ugly sometimes is because the sisters make them look that way. They have to wear tunics almost to their ankles."

"There's so much discrimination against the boys there, you wouldn't believe it. The girls tap you on the shoulder, and talk to you and then when you turn around, you're thrown out."

"There's only one teacher there who doesn't discriminate against the boys, and that's one of the Sisters."

"What if you were a teacher?"

"Right now, you have to put up your hand. If and when you get answered, you have to say, 'SIR, MAY I PLEASE open the window?'" Then he usually says, 'No. Sit down and shut up.'

"If I were a teacher, I'd have some stricter rules (like I'd treat all the kids the same) but I'd be lenient, too. I wouldn't strap somebody if he forgot a book or something. I'd say, 'make sure you bring it tomorrow.' If he forgot his tie, I wouldn't strap him for it, I'd ask him to get it when he could, at recess or at lunch. I'd listen to what the students have to say. I wouldn't treat them like filth. If people wanted to open the window, they could open it. Schools should be as easy to work in as possible. And for God's

sake, if they wanted to wear a sweater, or anything else, I'd let them.

"I'd discuss things with people. My opinion's no better than theirs unless I can explain it and they can accept it."

"You have to give reasons. With these teachers, there's no reasons. Just force. I would try to be democratic. Students could be responsible, except that nobody gives them the chance."

"I'm against the whole thing from the very beginning. Right now they only see one side of a shadow. No more. Just one side of a shadow."

Right now, I can't stand it. I just can't stand it. First of all, somebody should send about half of those teachers back to school. They should be paid to go back and learn the modern methods, and the modern subjects. Summer school isn't good enough. It isn't their fault, because nobody has sent them back to school."

Everything would be based on explanation and discussion. People can discipline themselves, if they know why and what the discipline is about. You can't strap people into submission. They've got to be interested. I'm not saying that a teacher shouldn't have interest in the students, that's the problem - only one male teacher has any interest in the students - its just that having interest doesn't mean you have to beat up every student you're interested in.

Why don't you talk to your teachers?

You can't talk to the teachers, because they'll take it to a higher authority."

"We don't trust them. Would you? Somebody should tell them, 'Teachers, we hate your guts. We hate your guts.' How can you trust them?"

"We tell them something about what we want. They hold a big meeting with the parents and tell them we've been saucing them."

"We try to have class meetings. They won't even listen to us. We were trying to have the gym open on Saturday and Friday nights, but they don't think we're responsible enough. They won't give us the chance to prove that we are responsible."

"The student council? Ha. They go in there, they ask for something, and they get bawled out. They're sometimes in there for two hours getting bawled out."

"Someday..."

"Someday we'll do it. We aren't the only students that are fed up. They're like this in every school. There's hundreds of students, thousands of students, like us. And someday, there'll be millions of students like us. All over the world. And there'll be one hell of a change."