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Catholic Schools and the Future of the Church (Book Review)

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BOOK REVIEW

Catholic Schools and the Future of the Church

Kathleen Engebretson

New York: Bloomsbury, 2014

208 pages; \$110.00 USD (hardcover), \$98.99 USD (ebook)

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Reviewed By Leonardo Franchi, University of Glasgow

The Church's commitment to education remains, as ever, bound to its mission to proclaim the Gospel to all people. The post-Vatican II corpus of Magisterial teaching on education vies with the Church's social teaching as one of the best-kept secrets of the Catholic mind. Alongside the development of Magisterial teaching on education, recent decades have seen a related growth in academic literature on the subject. While there is now plenty of movement with regard to the integration of Catholic social thought into the mainstream of Catholic life, Catholic teaching on education has yet to be fully digested and applied in a commensurate fashion to the global network of Catholic schools in which so many of the world's young people are educated.

The title of the book here reviewed explicitly links the Catholic school with the future of Church. This is a demanding thesis but the author rises to the challenge. Professor Kathleen (Kath) Engebretson, has made a significant contribution to the academic literature on Catholic education for many years. Along with her fellow Australians, Richard Rymarz, Graeme Rossiter, and Tracey Rowland, she has brought scholarly vigor, creative insight and pastoral sensitivity to this important field.

Catholic Schools and the Future of the Church is a worthy conspectus of the key themes of contemporary Catholic education. It brings together in one volume the many insights Professor Engebretson has gained from her years of scholarly activity in the field. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods inform the text: there is some probing analysis of data gathered from a range of surveys on Catholic education alongside considered reflec-

tion on the theological framework which underpins (or should underpin!) Catholic education. Unsurprisingly, the statistics come from an Australian context. Nonetheless, the common challenges facing Catholic education in secular settings allow many parallels to be drawn with the situation in other jurisdictions.

The book has 11 chapters. The headings of each chapter plot a course through the “hot button” issues of Catholic education such as leadership, the nature of religious education, and inclusion. Each chapter has a focused introduction, sub-headings which develop the theme explicitly set out in the main heading, and a conclusion. The inclusion of a set of questions at the end of each chapter is a helpful pedagogical feature of the book. This should encourage groups of educators to use the text for study and professional development purposes. A reference list is provided for each chapter.

Some of the chapters are worthy of special mention. Chapter 4, “Reviving the Chain of Memory,” nails the essence of Catholic education as a means of religious and cultural transmission. The sub-section headed, “Mapping the content of the religious education curriculum,” reminds the reader of doctrine’s essential place in the Catholic school curriculum (pp. 67-70). The author provides a taxonomy of important theological themes with the suggestion that by the end of Catholic high school most Catholic students could speak in an informed way about most of the following: God, Jesus Christ, The Holy Spirit, The Trinity, Church History, Creed, Sacraments, Eucharist, The Liturgical Year, Vocations, After Death, Catholic Moral Teaching, Prayer, and Mary. This is an ambitious set of targets and is an important map of where Catholic religious education should be headed.

Chapter 5, “Principles and Practices of a Methodology for Religious Education” shows how Catholic educators can educate young people in theology. Professor Engebretson’s thesis is that hostility to religious ideas among young Catholics is essentially a product of “boring teaching, content that does not challenge them false assumptions about their level of religious faith, language that exclude those not part of the Catholic ‘club’ and ignorance of or disrespect for their spiritual and religious life worlds” (pp. 85-86). While this is, perhaps, a controversial position to adopt, this reviewer is glad that she has not pulled her punches as the diagnosis rings true.

Chapter 7, written by Professor Richard Rymarz, illustrates how to teach complex topics in religious education. This chapter offers some solutions to the challenges outlined in Chapter Five. This very practical chapter would be an ideal text for discussion at in-service days. Rymarz proposes an education-

al approach to religious education, one rooted in a spiral curriculum. Allied to this, he reminds us that coherent religious education requires teachers who can explain complex topics well. Finally, he recommends the social learning model of Vygotsky as a means of challenging and supporting students in their educational journey. The chapter offers a detailed and commendable worked example for teaching about God (pp. 114-118). The provision of such examples might be one way of boosting the confidence of the teacher of religious education, especially those without any formal academic qualifications in the subject - although we would not wish to stifle the professionalism of the teacher.

There are a few areas which merit further reflection. In a section on dissent, it is stated that some of the issues around which dissent traditionally clusters—sexuality, priestly celibacy, papal infallibility—“have no historical connection with Scripture and Tradition” (p. 135). Is this really the case? Is the author not on some rocky ground here? Indeed, can one not make the case that the issues mentioned are examples of a genuine development of doctrine from the seeds of Scripture?

Chapter 10 explores Catholic schools through the distinctive/inclusive lens. This is a fine chapter but would have been better placed nearer the beginning of the text. The nature of the Catholic school surely needs to be explored before the framework of religious education is critiqued. Chapter 11, “Voices from Catholic Parishes,” offers an interesting sidelight on some of the themes woven through the book. I wonder whether this chapter, fascinating as its findings are, should be the core of another book as opposed to the final chapter of this volume. Indeed, a final chapter summarizing the main findings of the book and mapping out some ways ahead would have been welcome.

In conclusion, it is sometimes said that the “rush to publish” has saturated the academic market with titles destined only to take up space on a library shelf. There is more than a little truth in this. While the field of Catholic education is by no means an overloaded market—indeed I have heard some leading scholars claim that it is an under-researched field—we need to be wary of succumbing to academic fatigue when faced with new publications on well-trodden themes. Nonetheless, it is perhaps time to recover the virtue of true discernment in order to separate the wheat from the chaff. Those of us familiar with Professor Engebretson’s work would approach this new book with anticipated relish –and would not be disappointed in what we find.

In this era of the Church dedicated to the New Evangelization, Catholic schools will increasingly come under scrutiny as privileged places where the encounter with the Gospel of Jesus Christ takes place. This book will offer welcome inspiration for those involved in this mission.

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