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Book Review: Reclaiming the Piazza: Catholic Education as a Cultural Project

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Book Review

Reclaiming the Piazza: Catholic Education as a Cultural Project

Ronnie Covery, Leonardo Franchi, and Raymond McCluskey

Afterword by Robert A. Davis

Herefordshire, England: Gracewing Publishing, 2014

208 pages; £12.99

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Reviewed by Anthony Sabatino, Loyola Marymount University

In *Reclaiming the Piazza*, the authors offer readers insights from the *Progetto Culturale* (“Cultural Project”) of the Italian Episcopal Conference of Bishops, suggesting ways that outcomes of the Project might be applied to all of Western-world Catholicism. The *Progetto Culturale* was developed by the Italian Episcopal Conference of Bishops in response to a growing secularization Italian nation’s schools. Recognizing the close bond between Church and State in Italy, the authors present their work in light of the *Progetto*’s effort to encounter the evolving external culture that is becoming an influence on the mission and function of Catholic schools in Italy. As the authors describe,

...in brief, the *Progetto* is a way of living Catholicism in the contemporary age. It seeks to make an impact on intellectual and popular culture through the diffusion of the Gospel using a variety of creative ways. (p. xvi)

To further connect the reader to the Italian cultural experience, the authors leverage the image of the *piazza* (an open public square). According to the authors, the *piazza* serves as the heart of an Italian cultural experience; it is a place where people gather for discussion, dialogue, and to strengthen communal shared values. The *piazza* serves as the center of life from where a person learns and is formed from others in the culture. The authors propose

that Catholic schools, like the piazza, should discover a vision of themselves at the heart of a diverse society. Catholic schools, acting as the piazza, offer a place and program to form the minds of Catholic school students through the formed minds of Catholic educators.

The image of the piazza as the heart of a town emphasizes the Progetto's aim to place Christianity at the heart of society and allows the Christian vision of the human person to inform how people relate to each other in shared institutions of public life. Of course, there is an assumption here of a traditional Italian-style Church-state relationship in which the footprint of the Church looms large in public life. (p. xvi)

The authors paint the picture of challenge and limitation for Catholic schools in the current age because they exist in a culture dominated by a "modern secularist mindset" (p.2) in a multi-cultural society "which views religiously-inspired education systems as unwelcome reminders of an unenlightened age." (p.2) The authors begin the journey of the reader with the fundamental question of purpose of Catholic education: Is it to transform contemporary culture through an evangelizing mission? Or, is it to prepare those of the faith who will do battle with contemporary culture as it seeks to weaken the Gospel message? In response to either pathway, the authors believe Catholic schools are to be places where encounters with secular society are approached with a firm understanding of the school's "ecclesial identity, ...an engaged and integrated atmosphere in which the traditions and beliefs of Catholicism imbue the life and work of the school." (p.3) The authors provide the following list of features of a school's commitment to this ecclesial identity:

a close alignment between the hierarchy and the operation of the school; regular opportunities for religious worship; high visibility of religious symbolism in the fabric of the school; corporate satisfaction in a distinctive vision of Catholic education and a constant engagement with the unique philosophical and theological basis of Catholic education. (p.4)

From this ecclesial identity, the authors proclaim, comes an understanding by Catholic educators that the school has an important role in the teaching and evangelizing mission of the Church. According to the authors, meeting

the challenges of the contemporary world requires a Catholic school culture that is permeated by its ecclesial identity. The authors emphasize that a “Catholic school is a community of faith where all staff and pupils are encouraged and indeed expected to live according to the tenets of the Gospel and in fidelity to the Magisterium.” (p.5) Understanding the authors’ connection between the Progetto Culturale, the image of the piazza, the definition of ecclesial identity, and the components of a cultural project to transform Catholic schools, will serve the reader in interpreting the rest of the book.

Approaching this book from the perspective of a Catholic school educator born and raised in the United States, I found it challenging to understand the language used to express the image of the piazza as the center of Christian life. Although I have witnessed the piazza imagery first hand over three trips to Italy, which included several days visiting the Piazza Di Pietra (Piazza of Saint Peter's Basilica), I am unaccustomed to the lived experience of the piazza that fosters a strengthening of culture. Readers who have not been present to Italian—or for that matter European—culture may struggle with the approach and vision of Catholic education and Catholic schooling presented in the book.

Although I initially found myself needing to stop and seek clarity of meaning in the expression of concepts and ideas as I read, as I continued reading, I discovered the coding needed to decipher concept meaning and chapter connections to the authors’ theoretical position in proclaiming the Progetto Culturale as a model for Catholic education in the 21st century. Toward the end of the book, the authors move beyond theoretical exposition of their thesis and identify key elements of building a Catholic culture in schools that responds to the growing secularization of the societies of which these schools reside. This book, and in particular the more practice-focused discussion evident in Chapter 5, “The Catholic School as a Cultural Project,” would be valuable reading in a graduate-level course that includes discussion of contemporary contexts of Catholic schooling. Overall, I found the book informative; it provides a broad perspective on what Catholic schools in any country are facing when the secular culture does not support—or is in conflict with—the teaching and evangelizing mission of Catholic education.

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