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Book Review: Renewing the Mind: A Reader in the Philosophy of Catholic Education

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BOOK REVIEW

Renewing the Mind: A Reader in the Philosophy of Catholic Education

Ryan N. S. Topping, Ed.

Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press

432 pages; \$29.95 (paperback)

<https://www.hfsbooks.com/books/renewing-the-mind-topping/>

Reviewed by Betsy V. Ackerson, Ph.D.

Anyone involved in Catholic education today is familiar with the multiplicity of discussions surrounding mission, identity, pedagogy, and curriculum and the countless constructive tools, frameworks, and solutions developed and proposed by scholars and practitioners alike. Nonetheless, the discussion and search for solutions to the challenges facing Catholic education persist. At the core of these discussions are fundamental questions such as: “What is the purpose of Catholic education?”, “What should we be teaching?”, and “How do we best convey this information to our students?”. In his anthology, *Renewing the Mind: A Reader in the Philosophy of Catholic Education*, Ryan Topping introduces a refreshing and thought-provoking approach to the conversations.

In the midst of serious discussion and deliberation it is helpful to take a step back and remind oneself of the larger picture, and revisit the fundamental questions: “why,” “what,” and “how.” Of course, the simplest and most fundamental questions often are the most difficult to answer. Unlike many authors of books and articles about improving or enhancing Catholic education, Topping does not try to answer these questions. Instead, he introduces “students and teachers to a noble tradition of debate over the first principles of education” (p. 1). Topping reminds readers (and for some introduces the reality) that these same questions have been discussed and deliberated throughout the millennia; that “one can view the progression of contexts and at the same time observe that the fundamental questions of education have remained the same” (p. 10).

With this anthology Topping accomplishes two primary objectives. First, he provides an effective primer on philosophy that is both intellectually invit-

ing and invigorating, and “make[s] accessible some of the finest thinking about the principles of learning” (p. 9). Second, he demonstrated the efficacy and pragmatism of philosophical thought on the conundrums with which modern Catholic educators are contending.

Topping’s presentation of the material is very effective. The anthology is divided into four sections: “The Aims of Education;” “The Matter of Learning;” “The Methods of Teaching;” and “On Renewal in Our Time.” Each section contains multiple chapters that present chronologically the writings of philosophers and theologians who have addressed the topic(s) at hand. Each chapter begins with a brief introduction of the author whose work is being featured, presents an excerpt from the writings of that individual, and concludes with a list of suggested discussion questions that further explore the main concepts articulated as they relate to the practical purpose, design, and delivery of Catholic education today. Topping also provides a select list of related titles for additional reading. The writers and thinkers whose works Topping incorporates into the anthology include many familiar household names such as Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, and Newman, as well as lesser known figures including de Montaigne, Gerdil, and Montessori. The anthology is organized to provide maximum flexibility for the reader; it is not necessary to read this from front to back, or even sequentially within a section.

Commendably, Topping refrains from editorial commentary and allows the texts to speak for themselves. Although, the final section “On Renewal in our Time,” reveals a slight shift. Here Topping essentially provides a preliminary blueprint for the “ingredients” and components of catholic education by drawing on the teachings of the Holy Fathers of the modern age (Pope St. John XXIII, Pope St. John Paul II, and Benedict XVI) and other contemporary Church leaders and prominent thinkers (Archbishop Miller, Chesterton, Sayers, and O’Brien among others.) Many of the selected texts relate to the burgeoning delivery of Catholic education through classical schools and home schooling. Missing is any discussion about what is happening in traditional Catholic school settings—the parochial and religiously-sponsored schools and colleges—or in Catholic colleges and universities. Further, the chapters in this section reflect a decidedly strong curricular emphasis on Western Civilization. This certainly is an appropriate and necessary since Catholic education is greatly shaped by and a shaper of Western Civilization. Nonetheless, the silence on anything outside this scope is notable. Another addition that would strengthen the book would be greater consistency in the biographical sketches and backgrounds of all

the authors whose works are featured. As it stands, the introductions vary in their emphasis and focus.

In an era when many in catholic education do not bring with them a strong background in philosophy, this is a welcome resource. Topping's presentation of the philosophy of Catholic education through the centuries is accessible to both the philosophy novice and expert alike. Regardless of one's depth of knowledge in philosophy, it is refreshing to have these resources in a single compendium. The book also serves as a lesson in the history of philosophy of Catholic education over more than two thousand years of thought, theory, and practice. While not his main objective, a side benefit of this anthology is that readers are likely to discover (or rediscover) how contemporary and relevant these philosophical reflections are to Catholic education in the 21st century.

While the individual reader will benefit from reading this anthology, it is an ideal book for stimulating and provoking group discussions among educators—both the seasoned and the rookies alike. *Renewing the Mind* is an excellent resource to those involved in Catholic education in any capacity in both K-12 and higher education (faculty, administration, parents, ecclesial and religious sponsoring boards, K-12, higher education, etc.) It is perfectly suited for college faculty, K-12 faculty, Catholic school/college administrators, and undergraduate and graduate students interested in pursuing a career in Catholic education. With its discussion questions, this book is a perfect tool for professional development, a springboard for curricular design discussions, and an essential supplement to teacher preparation programs.

Renewing the Mind is refreshing and is aptly named. It provides “morsels for the mind” in a way that welcomes the non-philosopher and seeks to expand the circle of those conversing about Catholic education, the purposes of Catholic education, approaches to Catholic education, and the strengthening and renewal of Catholic education in the twenty first century. Topping has filled a great void and provided a valuable resource for anyone interested in, working in, or committed to shaping Catholic education in the years to come.

Betsy V. Ackerson, Ph.D. has worked in education for more than 20 years, most recently as Assistant Vice Provost at University of Virginia. She also serves on the Board of Directors of The Fellowship of Catholic Scholars.

