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The *Ressourcement* of Catholic Education in an Age of Iconoclasm

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Ryan N.S. (ed.) Topping, *Renewing the Mind: A Reader in the Philosophy of Catholic Education* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015).

I recently visited a college that had, at some point in its recent past, become reluctant about its Catholic identity. As I walked amidst a cluster of lovely neo-Gothic buildings, a particular doorway caught my attention. Located just beneath the bell tower, this eastward facing portal exhibited a typical Gothic-style pointed arch, which lifted one's eyes and spirit to the heavens. Above the doors was the tympanum, the space within the arch that draws your attention as your gaze drifts upward. The tympanum was strikingly empty—save for the remarkable, weatherworn outline of what could only have been a longstanding statue of Our Lady, now removed. The articulate outline of darkened, moldy stone set in stark relief the bright white stone within, in the unmistakable, elegant shape of Mary's mantle. In one respect, this iconoclastic attempt at revisionist architecture disrupted the whole aesthetic: the rising lines and the ornate stonework led your eyes directly to this tympanum, now empty, as their final resting place before leaping upward from the arch's point. But in another respect, the iconoclastic attempt failed: though the face of Mary and the folds of her mantle may no longer be seen, her humble presence in the tympanum as unweathered, radiant, immaculate stone was unmistakable.

In his remarkably wide-ranging compilation of texts—*Renewing the Mind: A Reader in the Philosophy of Catholic Education*—Ryan N. S. Topping provides much-needed assistance in understanding a wholly distinct iconoclastic attempt at revisionism: this time not with regard to stone, but with regard to education. Just as the architecture of that eastward portal depended aesthetically upon the content of the tympanum—which was removed—so too many of our educational structures, habits, institutions, and curricula depend upon a distinctly Christian theology and anthropology, which have likewise been largely removed from our

educational culture. The explicit debt to Christianity may be gone, like the statue, but the aforementioned aspects of educational theory and practice in the West continue to bear witness to the silent and humble presence of Christian radiance outlined at its heart. Yet our age attests to the fact that the center cannot hold the whole together if it is removed: the educational structures, habits, institutions, and curricula all stamped by Christianity will eventually decay and decline, according to the emptiness or the idol that is newly enthroned at their center.

In order to approach the lost center once again, a return to the sources is in order. *Renewing the Mind* communicates the “first principles of education” (9) not in a stolid, abstract manner, but through the introduction of the reader into “a noble tradition of debate over the first principles of education” (1), which takes place via the writings of persons in different times and places. A compendium of thirty-eight primary source texts communicates the first principles of Catholic education in an “enfleshed” manner, so to speak. Topping is hereby gesturing, as it were, to the radiant outline of the center since removed, attempting to reeducate us in its contours, its colors, its character.

Part One—on the aims of education—begins with Plato and ends with Pope St. John Paul II. The unity of vision here is remarkable: Plato, with his allegory of the cave, would likely agree with the statement of John Paul II’s encyclical *Fides et Ratio*:

the need for a foundation for personal and communal life becomes all the more pressing at a time when we are faced with the patent inadequacy of perspectives in which the ephemeral is affirmed as a value and the possibility of discovering the real meaning of life is cast into doubt. This is why many people stumble throughout life to the very edge of the abyss without knowing where they are going. (88)

Truly, to educate (*e-ducere*) is to lead persons out from the darkness of ephemeral, inadequate perspectives and behaviors into the light of truth and goodness. And, as Thomas à Kempis reminds us, the aim of this leading forth is not simply knowledge, but the very wisdom of heaven and the *ordo amoris*, the order of love: “that is the highest wisdom, to cast the world behind us, and to reach forward to the heavenly kingdom” (52).

Part Two—on the matter (and form) of learning—also begins with Plato, who reminds us that education does not simply concern abstract ideas and information, but more originally regards the harmony and order of the soul. Great medievalists are also encountered here—Hugh of St. Victor, Bonaventure, and Thomas—each with a remarkable contribution to the *ordo studiorum*, the order of studies. Perhaps the most dazzling text of this section is the address of St. Basil, one of the first systematic attempts to lay out an explicitly Christian approach to literature. The mixture of caution and enthusiasm for non-Christian writings is remarkable:

altogether after the manner of bees must we use these writings, for the bees do not visit all the flowers without discrimination, nor indeed do they seek to carry away entire those upon which they light, but rather, having taken so much as is adapted to their needs, they let the rest go.... For the journey of this life eternal I would advise you to husband resources, leaving no stone unturned, as the proverb has it, whence you might derive any aid. (110, 118)

For a third and final time Plato opens our next section, which treats pedagogy and method in education. This section features a radically diverse list of authors, from Aquinas to Erasmus,

from Montaigne to Montessori, and from the Jesuits to the Dominicans. Especially notable is the thread of reflection upon method in the education of children. After all, as Montaigne avers, “The greatest and most important difficulty of human science is the education of children” (194). Our pedagogy must be adequate to the subject, especially here: “’tis not a soul, ’tis not a body that we are training up, but a man, and we ought not to divide him” (203). Maria Montessori echoes the latter sentiment by suggesting that our inattention to the development period of ages 3–7, which “is the time for the formation of the sense activities as related to the intellect” (224), has led to a situation in which “we *isolate* man from his *environment*” (228). Isolation from the environment means an isolation from the real and it is contact with the real that is the birthplace of all wonder and true thought.

Finally, Part Four “illustrate[s] the contemporary renewal of Catholic education” (10–11). There is a particular richness of content included here; the breadth of engagement with various dimensions of education is impressive and helpful. Leo XIII opens the section with his call for the restoration of Christian philosophy; Ronald Knox adjures us powerfully, “If we don’t educate our children someone else will” (269); C.S. Lewis asks why a liberal arts education makes sense, even during a war effort that seemingly requires every ounce of England’s strength, resources, and attention; John Senior discusses how we can allow the great books of our tradition to bear fruit in our educational practice; Michael O’Brien discusses the dangerous shortcomings of our cultural mythologies (Disney films!); and John Paul II and Benedict XVI articulate respectively the educational impact of the family and the real reason that Catholic education has played such a prominent role in the Church’s history: “the profound responsibility to lead the young to truth is nothing less than an act of love” (382).

Overall, Topping’s reader is an indispensable aid for any person who wishes to understand the philosophy of Catholic education. Teachers and educators at every level will find this text to be a constant companion and a source of continual renewal. If any teacher questions his own resolve and the importance of his mission, this sourcebook can bring great reassurance: *tolle lege*—take it up and read!

By drawing us back to the center that has been hastily removed from our contemporary educational culture, Topping has opened up a space for us, his readers, to be truly educated: to be led out of our own limited perspective into the height, breadth, and depth of an authentic Catholic vision of education. Will we take up the challenge? Will we allow these first principles (*principio=arche*) to heal the anarchy (*an-archia*) present not only in our broader educational culture, but also in our hearts? Topping’s text is successful precisely because the person engaging his book has this question pressed upon his own soul. May Our Lady, the humble Seat of Wisdom, take the central place in our educational vision, and may she never be removed.

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Keep reading! Next comes Colleen Rouleau’s review of Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life.

