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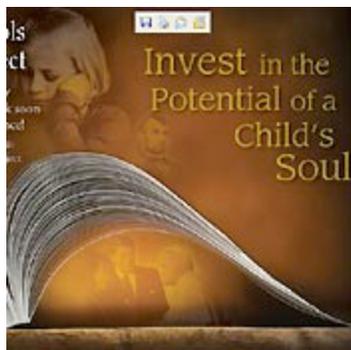
by J. Fraser Field

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The Catholic Schools Textbook Project — Fresh Tools for Teaching Old Truths

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Just before Joe Lieberman became the Democratic vice-presidential candidate he convened a meeting in Congress to look at the serious decline in historical literacy among Americans. During that meeting Stephen H. Balch, President of the National Association of Scholars, outlined the findings of a shocking report.

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Our Binding Heritage

Among other things, *Losing America's Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the 21st Century* reported that 81 percent of seniors at top-rated colleges received a D or an F on high school-level American history questions. The scholars present were unanimous in warning that the erosion of a common historical memory in the United States is a serious national crisis.

"Unlike many people of other nations," noted Theodore K. Rabb, chairman of the National Council for History Education, "...our binding heritage is a democratic vision of liberty, equality and justice. If Americans are to preserve that vision and bring it to daily practice, it is imperative that all citizens understand how it was shaped in the past."

Stephen Balch was even more forceful. If trends continue, he admonished, "We are in danger of losing America itself."

A similar crisis confronts us in our Catholic communities. At a time when Hollywood and many of the other major media sources openly mock and calumniate the Catholic Church's traditions and history - not to mention the social and moral positions she holds - evangelizing our Catholic population will require more than a basic instruction in Catholic faith.

History Textbooks Then and Now

At this time perhaps more than any other, the relationship between education in Catholic faith and education in Christian culture is a critical and interdependent one. Because in a sense, faith requires culture to incarnate itself and our culture is a long way from reflecting Christian principles. If our Catholic students are to emerge from our schools - from our homes - as strong believing Catholics, as men and women prepared to live in the world but not be of the world, as disciples intellectually equipped and spiritually willing to defend their faith and evangelize in the public square, they will have to become knowledgeable about the great wealth they have inherited in terms of culture.

If we fail to give our young Catholics a proper education in Catholic culture, they may well become, as historian Christopher Dawson predicted "divided personalities - with a Christian faith and a pagan culture which contradict one another continually." The challenge and importance of the study of Catholic culture for Catholic education can hardly be over emphasized.

That said, you should know it has been 35 years since the last series of history textbooks were written for Catholic schools - published by Benziger Press in 1965. That series was written during the Second Vatican Council and discarded, or never purchased, by Catholic schools soon afterwards. It has been re-issued in photocopy by Neumann Press, with limited circulation.

Instead, most Catholic schools have been drawn into more secular solutions, giving Catholic school children textbooks written to tell a story that leaves Christian history short-changed and, too frequently, denigrates the Catholic contribution. High school history textbooks - and elementary school social studies textbooks - written for the secular public schools are full of attractive colors, photos, and charts, but they barely notice the Catholic Church and Christian history. In addition, many of these texts have come under heavy criticism for being poorly written - wooden and impersonal - and for generally lacking those elements of adventure, heroism, and idealism which are the very heart and soul of engaging history.

"We've lost a lot of literary quality as we've replaced the core texts with pictures, white space, and all sorts of glossy graphics," declares Gilbert Sewall of the American Textbook Council. History used to be conveyed much more effectively than it is today, say the experts, through stories full of intrigue, struggle, pathos, and triumph.

Most Important Development in Years

The Catholic schools of this country need a contemporary history textbook series which makes use of advances in book design, printing, and technology and which presents the lessons of history in a compelling narrative style. Our schools need books which acknowledge and make use of a new generation of scientific and historical discovery and which respond to contemporary questions and challenges - fresh tools to teach old truths to a new age. A Catholic perspective, a fresh and appealing narrative style, and an accurate presentation of the Catholic Church's central contribution to our world today needs to be made available for Catholic schools to use in forming the next generations.

The exciting news is that just such a series is now being written - some of it is already at the printers (Ignatius Press). The Catholic Schools Textbook Project, directed by Michael Van Hecke, is surely one of the most important developments to come along in Catholic education in years. Every indication is that this series will have the attractiveness of the secular books now being used without their biases and limitations and that, in addition, it will be as well written and engaging as good history has always been.

The project web site — www.catholictextbookproject.com — will post information on when each grade's history texts will be available. Contact them at 805-987-9033 for more information.

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