

Seeking Textbooks Fit for Catholic Schools Headmaster in California Wants to Give Teachers a Choice

VENTURA, California, AUG. 21, 2003 (Zenit.org).– Michael Van Hecke didn't like what he saw in history textbooks, so he did something about it.

The president of the Catholic Schools Textbook Project and the headmaster of St. Augustine Academy here, Van Hecke has undertaken a program to publish books for Catholic schools, beginning with a history series. He shared his views about the project with ZENIT.

Q: Could you explain briefly the genesis of the Catholic Schools Textbook Project?

Van Hecke: A number of years ago, early in my teaching career, I was assigned to teach a history class. My choice of books was between a beautiful secular book with poorly written, boring and incomplete history, and a photocopy of an old Catholic textbook which was visually uninspiring, but more balanced in style and content of material. My question: Why can't these two be combined?

As I subsequently found out, there used to be whole lines of texts separately produced for the Catholic school system similar to the secular models, but which included the Catholic contributions to history, or literature, or science, as the subject allowed. Yet, this option had disappeared. Someone had decided that the secular texts were just fine. And maybe they were better, back then.

Yet, that is not the case now! After becoming a headmaster 12 years ago and having to find books for my own schools, I was driven to create something to fill the vacuum. The only publisher producing new books for Catholic schools -- other than religion texts -- was Loyola Press of Chicago, which produces language-arts and Latin materials.

I began to find other interested educators who were interested in helping me carry out this project. Dr. Rollin Lasseter became my first partner in this effort. We began with one of the most urgent needs -- a new history textbook for Catholic schools.

Thus the Catholic Schools Textbook Project was born as an independent nonprofit educational apostolate serving the Catholic schoolchildren in

America. ... We plan on eventually producing texts for all subjects and grades so Catholic schools have a choice.

Right now, our only options are photocopies or reprints of old Catholic texts or the standard secular fare. Almost every Catholic school in the country has taken the route of secular texts since they are widely available and visually attractive. Now our Catholic schoolteachers will have an option.

Q: What kind of market do you envision for these books? Is it a limited audience? Could home schoolers use them?

Van Hecke: These new textbooks are for use in Catholic education, period. Obviously, non-Catholics would enjoy them and learn much, but our target audience is Catholic schoolchildren.

This means we envision that students in diocesan parochial schools, religious and independent Catholic schools, and the immense number of home-schooled children will be using these texts in the coming years.

We have already had success in all these educational arenas with our first text, "All Ye Lands," and orders are coming in now for our newest title, "Sea to Shining Sea, The Story of America."

"All Ye Lands" has been out a little more than a year and is already being used in Catholic schools in 17 states, *[now in 33 states, over 100 Schools in 33 States, 2 Canadian Provinces, the Philippines, Australia & New Zealand]* in Canada, the Philippines and in other English-speaking countries. Most of that has happened with little marketing. When people see these books, they want them in their schools and Catholic teaching environments.

Q: Do you have support from Church officials for the project? What have they said?

Van Hecke: The Catholic Schools Textbook Project has met with enthusiastic support from bishops, educational leaders, diocesan educational administrators, principals, teachers, parents and especially students. I received great encouragement from the late Cardinal O'Connor to make this project a reality. Other bishops, early on, encouraged and supported our idea. Seven bishops serve on our Episcopal Advisory Board and nine have endorsed us from the beginning.

Q: School texts often see battles over their cultural and moral content. What contribution will this project make to preserving a distinctive Catholic culture?

Van Hecke: Current secular texts, and old Catholic texts, generally do not address the intellectual and cultural needs of today's Catholic students. I am not alone in my assessment of the situation. Other educators have also noted a defect common to both secular and Catholic texts: They are written in a style that fails to capture the drama of history.

History, as its name indicates, is, first and foremost, a story; a story as riveting as any fictional tale and as full of tragedy and comedy, of despair and hope as any novel or epic. Its characters are real human beings like each one of us; some are heroes, others are villains; some are exceptional, but most are average people trying to work through the unique circumstances of their time and place.

Since history has the character of story, it must be told as a story, especially to young readers. History texts should draw us into the hopes and fears, the struggles and victories of men of past times. They should help us meet historical characters as real people of flesh and blood.

For over a decade, the Catholic Schools Textbook Project has been working to produce textbooks pleasing to the eye, accurate, interesting to read, and imbued with Catholic tradition. These textbooks have been written in view of these goals.

The texts relay to students the necessary "secular" historical knowledge, while giving due place to the contributions of Catholics and of the Catholic Church in the history of the world, without which we cannot hope to preserve our culture. We also tell of other cultures which are a reality in our world and with which we must interact in our Gospel call.

Since secular texts have been used to teach history to the past two generations, young people and their parents have not had the benefit of any Catholic culture from their texts. Thankfully, many parents and teachers have made up for the defects of those texts, but many others have not done so. Now all have the option to at least hear the full story of history, well told and balanced.

Q: What is the importance of an accurate historical memory for those growing up today?

Van Hecke: It is essential. In times of increasing cultural division, we need to know our roots, our path coming and going, and the hope essential to the Christian life. Stories of hope, which our Holy Father has put before us again and again in his writings and beatifications, are key to our faithfulness. We must give young people these stories. We must give them hope.

To be Catholic is to be countercultural. For too long, this has been misunderstood as "against-culture." If this is the understanding, then we create a vacuum which must be filled. Our children will fill it with something. We need to understand countercultural as meaning "another culture" and provide them with the true, the good and the beautiful.

With the fuel of these verities, our children can grow to live the promise of the Christian life as so many saints before us did, making the world a better place and achieving our final calling to be with him forever in heaven.

Q: Are there more books being planned?

Van Hecke: Currently two of the nine-book history series have been published. The two volumes now in print are suitable for middle school grades, grades five to nine. Three more volumes, suitable for higher grades and high school, are in production.

We are in the process of securing authors for four additional volumes which will complete the history series for grade school. The books maybe easily adapted to the individual sequencing of a school's curriculum. We have also begun planning for two new series in science and literature/poetry, also distinctly important subjects where the Catholic mind must be developed and the Catholic contributions must not be ignored.

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For more information, call toll-free (866) 458-3332 or see www.CatholicTextbookProject.com.
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