

## **FROM THE HEART OF THE AMERICAN CHURCH: CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION AND AMERICAN CULTURE**

DAVID O'BRIEN. ORBIS BOOKS, 1994.

*Reviewed by Michael Garanzini, S.J.*

Cardinal Newman thought of the Catholic university as a "middle station." He envisioned it functioning as a place where the Church and secular society, represented by clergy and laity, could meet in order to learn from each other, and, as he put it, to "yield to each other, and from which, as from common ground, they may act together in unison upon an age which is running headlong into infidelity" (Dessain & Gornell, 1974). This might be a noble ideal, but is it a realistic one, and is it something we still need today?

David O'Brien's book, *From the Heart of the American Church: Catholic Higher Education and American Culture*, is a timely and extremely important contribution to understanding our recent past and the challenges which we face in determining our future. Furthermore, the present debates over ownership of these institutions, the maintenance of Catholic identity, and the cultivation of a new leadership for Catholic higher education are taking place at all levels of the educational apostolate. Elementary and secondary schools share many of the same questions and challenges.

Like all good history teachers, O'Brien conveys his perceptions with insight and wit. His text is sprinkled with anecdotes and accounts illuminating the point he is making. Early in the book, for example, he recounts an incident which draws attention to how far we've come from the hierarchical, clerical culture of the 1950s. It seems that a bishop told a congregation at a parish dedication of their grade school that there are three essentials in every parish: a school in which the priest, assisted by the sisters, can teach Catholic doctrine; a Church in which a priest can offer Catholic worship; and, of course, a priest. "He neglected," the author tells us, "to mention the people perhaps because, in some sense, they were not needed."

All involved in discussions surrounding the challenges facing Catholic institutions of higher learning need to read O'Brien's book for the clarity of his presentation regarding the history of Catholic higher education and his insights into the forces that shaped the present debate on these issues.

The book serves another important purpose. While not overly prescriptive regarding recommendations for the future, O'Brien offers examples of the programs which attempt to provide a relevant Catholic education to undergraduate and graduate students alike. His section on strategies is a brief catalogue of models that are being tried at large and small institutions alike.

Experiments in such activities as faculty orientation and the promotion of a distinctive Catholic scholarship are chronicled, giving a picture of a dynamic enterprise at work in the Church today.

For all those who feel that Cardinal Newman wrote the last word on Catholic education and scholarship, O'Brien's book is a forceful reminder that the project Newman promoted more than a hundred years ago is alive and well. O'Brien's careful study of such important matters as how lay ownership of institutions has evolved a new sense of ownership by Catholic lay women and men and how we will settle our disagreements over the proper ordinances through which the Church will nourish this jewel in her crown brings clarity, perspective, and insight at just the right time in our history.

## REFERENCE

Dessain, C. S., & Gornell, T. (Eds.). (1974). *The letters and diaries of John Henry Newman*. London: T. Nelson.

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